

# 04

## NANKURUNAISA

Original concept by  
PRODUCTION I.G  
ANIPLEX

A novel by  
**RYO IKEHATA**

Illustrations by  
CHIZU HASHII

# BLOOD+

Based on the hit Cartoon  
Network animated series!











In order to destroy the Queen of the Chiropterans,  
Saya and Hagi began their journey.

After over a hundred years and travels to many countries,  
the final battle with Diva has arrived.

Everything depends on the path both Saya and Hagi choose . . .

Hagi, remember our promise.  
After it's all over . . .  
Then you must—



BLOOD+





**OTHER *BLOOD+* NOVELS  
FROM DARK HORSE BOOKS**

*Blood+* Volume 1: First Kiss

*Blood+* Volume 2: Chevalier

*Blood+* Volume 3: Boy Meets Girl

# BLOOD+

NANKURUNAISA

VOLUME FOUR

*original concept by* Production I.G • Aniplex

*a novel by* Ryo Ikehata

*illustrations by* Chizu Hashii

*English translation by* John Thomas



Milwaukie



**SAYA OTONASHI**—A girl who has lived over 100 years and who fights the blood-sucking Chiropterans. She seeks to continue her battle with her longtime enemy, Diva.



**RIKU MIYAGUSUKU**—Kai's little brother and a good-natured boy. He became Saya's Chevalier, but his life was taken by Diva's hand.



**HAGI**—A handsome cellist. He is a Chevalier who is always at Saya's side to fight the Chiropterans.



**DAVID**—A battlefield professional and member of Red Shield, the secret organization out to destroy the Chiropterans. He pursues Diva with an iron will.



**KAI MIYAGUSUKU**—Short-tempered but pure-hearted, this boy puts nothing above his family. He follows Saya despite her uncertain fate.



**LOUIS**—A Red Shield member and David's partner. He supports the team with his expertise in gathering intelligence and has a voracious appetite.

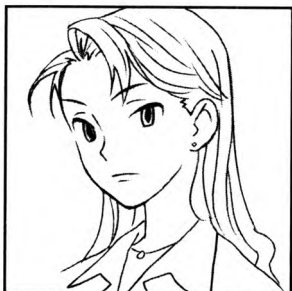




**JOEL**—Director of Red Shield and head of the incredibly wealthy Goldschmidt family. He is putting everything on the line to ensure the annihilation of Chiropterans.



**MOSES**—A member of the synthetic Chevaliers known as the Schiff and manufactured under Anshel. He has taken on the burden of being the Schiff leader.



**MAO JAHANA**—Kai's classmate. She and Okamura went to search for Kai after he and Saya had disappeared and ended up becoming a part of Red Shield's support team.



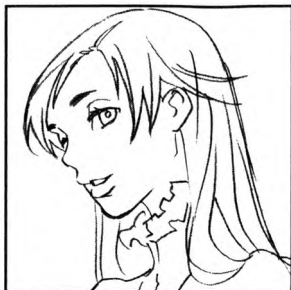
**CARMEN**—Like Moses, an artificially manufactured Chevalier, or Schiff. His personality is a combination of theatrical and belligerent and he carries a long trident.



**AKIHIRO OKAMURA**—A reporter for the Ryukyu Daily Newspaper. He is interested in the series of Chiropteran incidents that started in Okinawa, and followed Saya, only to become a supporter of Red Shield.



**LULU**—The only surviving female Schiff. Her first positive relationships with humans were with members of Red Shield.



**DIVA**—Saya's twin sister and queen of the Chiropterans. She is both pure as an angel and cruel as a devil.



**JAMES**—One of Diva's Chevaliers. He is also the captain of a nuclear powered aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy. He disappeared after his battle with Saya in England . . .



**ANSHEL**—Head of the gigantic corporation, Goldsmith Holdings. In reality he is the eldest of Diva's Chevaliers.



**NATHAN**—The youngest of Diva's Chevaliers. He is also the producer for an opera house. His friendly nature hides something sinister.



**SOLOMON**—The C.E.O. of Cinq Flèches Pharmaceuticals. He is one of Diva's Chevaliers but has feelings for Saya.



**JULIA**—A former member of Red Shield's medical team. She and Collins left Red Shield to join Diva.



**COLLINS**—Formerly the top of Red Shield's medical research team, he switched sides to work for Diva.



**VAN ARGENO**—An executive at Cinq Flèches Pharmaceuticals who works under Solomon. He is partially responsible for the development of Delta 67, a drug that changes people into Chiropterans.

BLOOD+ VOL. 4: NANKURUNAISA

© Ryo Ikehata 2007

© 2005 Production I.G • Aniplex • MBS • HAKUHODO.

First published in Japan in 2007 by KADOKAWA SHOTEN Publishing Co., Ltd., Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA SHOTEN Publishing Co., Ltd., Tokyo, through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the express written permission of the copyright holders. Names, characters, places, and incidents featured in this publication either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, institutions, or locales, without satiric intent, is coincidental. Dark Horse Books® and the Dark Horse logo are registered trademarks of Dark Horse Comics, Inc. All rights reserved.

Book design by Heidi Whitcomb

Cover and interior illustrations by Chizu Hashii

English translation by John Thomas

Special thanks to Philip Simon, Michael Gombos, J. Harrison Barber,  
and Camellia Nieh for editing consultation.

Published by Dark Horse Books

A division of Dark Horse Comics

10956 SE Main Street

Milwaukie, OR 97222

darkhorse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ikehata, Ryo.

[Fasuto kisu. English]

First kiss / written by Ryo Ikehata ; illustrations by Chizu Hashii ; English translation by John Thomas.

p. cm. -- (Blood+ ; v. 1)

"First published in Japan in 2006 by Kadokawa Shoten ..., Tokyo"--T.p. verso.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59307-898-0

I. Hashii, Chizu. II. Thomas, John. III. Title.

PL871.5.K44F3713 2008

895.6'36--dc22

2007048513

Dark Horse Books First Edition: August 2009

ISBN 978-1-59307-933-8

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# C O N T E N T S

*Book Seven: New York* . . . . . 001

*Epilogue: Okinawa* . . . . . 301

*Afterword* . . . . . 327

*Commentary* . . . . . 329

BLOOD+04



**BOOK SEVEN: NEW YORK**

THE PASSENGER CAR vibrated rhythmically as its iron wheels ground into the rails.

If the windows had been carelessly left open, smoke would have come in, but this train was much nicer to ride in than the four-horse carriages the aristocrats might have used.

Since they had left the Zoo and began their journey, they had seen many strange and amazing things and had many wondrous experiences. It had only taken them a few days to travel through Europe and across barren Russia in this giant steam-powered train, to Saya's surprise.

However, this was not a pleasure trip.

What she needed to do was to fight—to kill Diva.

Seated beside Hagi, Saya thought the view of the frozen Russian tundra looked like something one might see on a postcard.

This large northern country was in the middle of a revolution. According to the newspaper they had bought the day before at the train station in Vienna, Russia was very unstable at the moment.

"Russia is in chaos. That's why Diva escaped to this country."

Saya spoke as she sat down on one of the compartment seats. The landscape passing by in the window was enveloped in the deep

northern winter. Russian winters were harsh, and the battle wouldn't be easy.

"In that country, endless confusion awaits her."

The tall, slender man in the black frock coat who sat across from her finished checking over his cello case.

"The Chevaliers likely led their queen to a safe place."

"A safe place for their queen . . . ?"

In the eye of the storm of confusion was the imperial court of the Romanov Dynasty. Diva may have intended to hide herself in that chaotic paradise.

With its tip pointed into the floor, Saya gripped the handle of her katana with both hands.

When she had practiced fencing at the Zoo she had used a much thinner rapier. Just like in the tale of the Romans she had read in Joel's study, a childlike desire to explore the world had put a sword in Saya's hand.

The world had already moved from swords and armor to the age of gunpowder, but in Saya's daydreams of griffins and dragons, of Cyclops and pirates, the only thing she needed was the weapon of the knight. A sword.

Someday she and Hagi would traverse the entire planet . . .

It wasn't an innocent fantasy. With her sword in her hands and so far away from home with Hagi, Saya could feel it deep in her gut and she let out a long, slow laugh that sounded more like a deep sigh.

The Saya of the past and the Saya of today were different in every single way.

Her sword was a beautiful and strong katana, and she wasn't

wearing an expensive dress, but worn-in traveling clothes. Her once-long hair had been cut short like a schoolboy's.

The enemies she targeted were not the monsters and foreign scoundrels dreamed up in people's imaginations, but very real goblins—creatures like herself that brought death and despair to the human world.

Saya's eyes closed and she bit her bottom lip.

"... Hagi, our promise."

She couldn't remember how many times she had said this to him.

That was when his beautiful eyes became clouded. She already knew his answer, but she couldn't help asking. If they couldn't throw everything away and escape to their secret place, then this battle would never be won.

"After I kill Diva . . . and everything is over, then you must—"

Saya's voice was drowned out by the long cry of a steam whistle.

However, Hagi continued to gaze silently at Saya's face, responding as he usually did to his master's requests.

"If that is what you wish . . ."

The pain Saya felt in her chest was again quelled by his kind response.

"... Thank you."

*I truly am cruel . . .*

It was Saya's weakness that caused Hagi pain. Spoiled by his loyalty, she demanded him to do the thing that would hurt him the most. Saya closed her eyes, aware of her sin.

*I am sorry . . . Hagi.*



In her dream, she had been crying.

It was a scene she often recalled from her past. Seeing Hagi's misty eyes tore open Saya's heart, and what poured out was not blood but tears.

Saya thought about how sad his face would look when he carried out the promise.

She was aware of her head lying on a soft and slightly soapy smelling pillow before she opened her eyes and realized the tears that flowed weren't only in her dream.

Hagi was sitting in a chair next to the bed and leaned back away from her. Had he just wiped the tears from her eyes with his left hand?

"Hagi . . . where is everybody?"

The bedroom was dark. It was night.

According to the clock, it was already dinnertime, but she didn't hear any voices from the living room.

"They went looking for an apartment."

"Oh . . ."

Hagi's response reminded Saya that they were no longer in the farmhouse outside of London, but in an expensive New York hotel.

This hotel, located near Wall Street, was temporary housing for Saya and the rest of the group.

Joel had them covered financially, but on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, Joel's power as a member of the well-known European Goldschmidt family didn't mean quite as much. He didn't have residences waiting for them like he had in Paris, which was why Kai and the others were now apartment hunting.

Saya threw the sheets off with one hand as she sat up.

Her vision shook and for a moment she lost her sense of balance.

"Are you all right, Saya?"

"Yes . . . but I feel cold."

During this time of year, the temperature stayed mild even after the sun went down. The radiator in the room was on and working. But even so, Saya's head felt heavy and her body ached when she moved, as if she had a slight cold.

". . ."

Hagi didn't need to say anything for Saya to know what he was thinking.

She was nearing the dormant time, and her body was shutting down. Just like animals that hibernated in the winter, in order to conserve energy her body temperature had dropped and her reflexes were dulled. She had already lost much of her appetite, and eventually her breathing and heart rate would slow down as well.

She would then enter thirty years of sleep.

Time was growing short as that moment neared.

Saya sat on the edge of the bed and looked out the window.

She saw several skyscrapers, their bodies illuminated from the inside with artificial light, obscuring the stars in the night sky. So many people must live in this city. How many cities like this covered the planet?

People lived on, not knowing how easily their lives could be cut short. Saya needed to spend her remaining time protecting their normal days.

"Take this."

At some point Hagi had stood and picked up a metal cup.

The strong smell of coffee filled the room.

"Thank you."

Saya took the cup and brought it to her lips. The coffee was hot enough to burn her tongue, and quickly erased any remaining drowsiness.

"There sure are a lot of people . . ." Saya whispered as her eyes scanned the outside, almost making her dizzy.

"... But they still know nothing of Diva and the Chiropterans. Nothing of us, either."

Their only battles were with their everyday lives.

If it was all right for them not to know, then not knowing was the best. But Saya was a tiny bit envious of their ignorance. They lived their lives without having to know anything.

"After all we've done—when it's over, no one will even know that anything happened, will they?"

"That's the decision you and Joel's descendents made."

Saya nodded her assent.

If it started with her, it had to end with her.

She did not intend to abandon her responsibilities.

However—her only regret was for her companion.

"... I'm sorry, Hagi. If I hadn't made you a Chevalier, this never would have happened."

She had given Hagi her blood to save him. However, as a result of her decision, his body transcended time, and he had become immortal, spending the last hundred years throwing himself into battle at her side. After his endless agony, a human-like, peaceful death might be welcome.

"Saya, I do not regret becoming your Chevalier."

He always said things like this to calm her.

"You said it at that time. You want to carry a blade and walk the world. You said you wanted me to be at your side, Saya."

"Hagi . . ."

Unprepared for his words, Saya swallowed her breath.

He remembered.

It was something she had said to him so very long ago, before he had grown taller than her.

"At that time, I felt lonely and isolated. Those words were a great comfort to me. I was not alone . . . and that's why, Saya, I am here with you now."

Saya recalled Diva's Chevalier, whose loneliness had driven him to insanity.

Karl Fei-Ong.

Like Hagi, he had been the subject of a cruel experiment as a boy. He prowled around like a phantom, his heart hungry for love.

Both were Chevaliers born from similar circumstances, but Hagi and Karl had walked different paths from there. It made Saya happy to think that her words may have had something to do with that . . . It was a real relief.

But was that truly how Hagi felt?

Chevaliers are concerned for nothing but their queen. They would sacrifice every drop of blood that flowed through their veins to protect her. If they needed to relieve their queen of her sadness, a soothing lie might be . . .

She didn't want to hear Hagi's duty as a Chevalier, but his true feelings as a person.

But the mere fact that he told her what she needed to hear to keep her safe and calm warmed her heart greatly. Saya took his hand in hers and put her head against his chest.

"Thank you . . . Hagi."

It might have been because her own body was cold, but his hand felt very warm.

The mansion just outside the city in the suburbs of New York wasn't overly fancy, but it was big enough and was furnished elegantly. The white wooden house, surrounded by green grass, looked like a colonial mansion, but the large stone pillars and walls in the central garden harked back to a much older age, to Greece and the Orient.

The owner of the residence had brought these relics in special for his garden, to make his queen happy.

The song that had once flowed through the sky above the Zoo now rang in the air of a garden in the New World.

Relishing hearing that beautiful voice in his own home, Nathan Mahler walked across the grass and into the garden.

As his tall figure moved into the shade of a tree, the water-like flow of the song was interrupted.

"What's the matter?" Nathan asked as he looked at the now-open eyes of the individual sitting in a deck chair. Her clear eyes were the color of the South Seas.

And they seemed to be staring at nothing.

Her blank stare didn't waver from the sky, and her hands were clearly trembling as they pushed against her abdomen.

"Diva . . . ?"

For a second time, he called out to the boy—no, the smile that slowly crept out from between her lips was that of a girl.

Diva disappeared from the deck chair and threw both arms around Nathan's shoulders. As saliva dripped from her spreading jaws, she sunk her teeth into his exposed throat.

"Unnh . . ."

What spilled from Nathan's lips was not a moan of pain.

He smiled in ecstasy as his eyes wandered vacantly.

"Oooh . . . that feels nice. My blood becomes one with my queen . . . a Chevalier's time of bliss . . ." Nathan slowly closed his eyes.

Diva's white throat pulsed rhythmically as she aggressively sucked down Nathan's blood.

After several long moments Nathan slowly opened his eyes.

"Diva?"

His queen should have been satisfied by now. She was fickle about the blood that was offered to her and there was no reason for her to need this much.

But Nathan felt no decrease in the blood being pulled from his veins.

"Sto . . . p . . . Diva . . . wait. If you keep . . . I will . . ."

*Be sucked dry.*

It was when Nathan finally complained that she suddenly separated her lips from his neck.



As her long fangs withdrew from his skin, Nathan released a long sigh and stumbled to catch his balance—less from a sense of relief than an overload of pleasure.

When he lifted his head, Diva had already moved into the shadows of the trees on the far end of the garden.

Nathan felt complete satisfaction hearing her once again sing against this scenery.

“Diva got you, didn’t she?”

A voice called down from a second-story balcony of the residence.

Nathan saw Anshel appear. He was wearing a suit the color of a rich burgundy wine.

“She seems a little overexcited lately, even for Diva . . .”

Nathan laughed as he rubbed his neck with his hand.

The holes had already healed over. But even a Chevalier was not invulnerable. If enough blood were drained from his body, he would lose all his strength. Nathan had been near that point only moments earlier.

“What about *you*? Didn’t the humans pull one over on you?”

“I am not surprised that’s how you see it.” Anshel’s serious countenance cracked to reveal only the slightest of smiles.

One week earlier, secret photos from a certain upscale restaurant had been released onto a free video-upload site. The leader of Goldsmith Holdings had come to the U.S. as a gesture of friendship to Secretary of Defense Grant, and the video showed him being gunned down by a hoodlum soon after his arrival.

It appeared on CNN’s evening edition four nights later.

The death of the head of Cinq Flèches Pharmaceuticals, just as it transferred the head office to the U.S., came as nothing less than a major shock.

The authorities denied the turn of events, but the video itself was too compelling. Most people believed that Anshel Goldsmith was dead.

But here he was, alive and well.

"You're no better than they are. Acting like you were shot and killed like that."

Anshel wouldn't die from the likes of that attack. Nathan would have required direct proof from the assassin who carried out the kill to believe Anshel was dead.

"Advancing one's interests using violence is a rather droll approach," Nathan continued. "*Human* is what it is."

"Then what do you plan to do?"

"Nothing. Their failure isn't meaningless. It will force Grant to adjust his way of thinking."

The plan to assassinate Anshel had been initiated by the leader of a large defense contractor and Cinq Flèches' rival. That rival company and Grant were very close, and they had recently sealed a partnership for expanding U.S. military defenses. It was hard to imagine Grant had known nothing of the assassination attempt beforehand.

Perhaps with the completion of the Corpse Corps, the Delta Project appeared completed, and the act was an attempt to knock Cinq Flèches a few notches down on the food chain. As a general rule, Americans were afraid of things they couldn't control. Cinq Flèches and Goldsmith had tapped into America's

desires with Delta Project, but they had also awoken her fears. For Grant and the other U.S. leaders, the arrangement must have been uncomfortable—even a little humiliating.

And so, to ease that anxiety, a plan to push Goldsmith aside and reestablish the position of a more trusted partner had been enacted.

But it had ended in failure.

Grant was wise and had guts. He was also quite the actor. If he knew Anshel was alive, he would likely decide to continue working with Cinq Flèches.

In order to force that decision, Anshel played along with the news reports and spent some time in hiding. After a week went by he would expose himself to the public.

In the meantime, the main sponsor of Cinq Flèches America stood overlooking the rear garden and the tall gazebo in the central garden where Diva's producer, Nathan Mahler, was preparing for a party.

A steady stream of guests ambled over the grass and stone walkways, stopping to chat under the large parasols.

David was a seasoned warrior, but he shrank from the feeling that infinite pairs of eyes were staring at him.

"It's been a while since we've been in this kind of situation." The man who spoke was the wheelchair-bound Joel.

Around them were seated corporate VIPs, politicians, and state and local officials, accompanied by their spouses. Their attention was focused on the young man in the wheelchair.

"You can sure put the Goldschmidt name to good use," David murmured.

"The flow of money and resources transcends national borders. I share my name with my ancestors, who managed to build up quite a fortune." Joel spoke with no hint of nervousness on his face.

This was the residence of Nathan Mahler. David felt like he had stepped into the inner sanctuary of his enemy. Naturally, they hadn't been invited, but in a risky, desperate gambit, they had managed to talk their way in.

And not a drop of sweat appeared on Joel's brow.

His Goldschmidt blood must have given him the power to look noble and confident no matter what the situation. They had procured an invitation, of course, and the man who had checked it had no doubt assumed that Goldschmidt and Goldsmith were branches of the same family, but David guessed that Joel's attitude had done as much as his name to sway the doorman.

Their neighbors continued to whisper. "That's a Goldschmidt . . . he's very young."

"For generations, they set the prices on gold and diamonds, and then uranium and rare metals, however they pleased. They bought up the land and no one could do anything about it."

"I would never expect to see one at something like this . . ."

Reverent comments were mixed in with whispers tinged here and there with jealousy.

Right then a commotion near the gazebo took David's attention from the gossip.

"Those men . . . why . . ."

David examined the faces of the olive-skinned men seated near the edge of the crowd.

He had seen them somewhere before.

They were the heads of a large Israeli corporation. There were rumors the American forces and Secretary of Defense Grant had a very chummy new relationship with an arms manufacturer from overseas—perhaps this was it.

Their faces glistened with nervous sweat. David followed their gaze just in time to see a man walk in from the terrace.

Ignoring the collective shock of the group assembled, Anshel Goldsmith calmly returned nods and waves as he made his way through the crowd.

What stopped him in his tracks wasn't an invited American official, the CEO of a major corporation, or a Hollywood starlet who flew in on a private jet. It was a young man seated in a wheelchair.

"It couldn't be . . . The head of the Goldschmidt family graces us with his presence."

Joel looked at Anshel and smiled. "Thank you for attending Father's funeral, Uncle Anshel."

Joel had been only a child when his father had passed away.

However, he wasn't so immature as to not understand why his father had died. Otherwise, he probably never would have taken over as the leader of Red Shield.

The Joels of the past had been kind men and were well loved, but they had been weak when it came to battle.

When Joel's father had first found out about the existence of Chiropterans, Red Shield had been a frail organization in no

position to stand against the Chevaliers. It was in that weakened state that Joel's father had made one of his worst decisions.

A failed mission in Vietnam had left that Joel mourning the loss of David's father, led to Hagi's disappearance, and left Red Shield in disarray. David's father's dying wish had been for David to follow in his path and become a member of the Shield. To David, Joel's father had been a close friend, but he had never been a comrade David could completely trust in battle.

Maybe if David had been as old then as he was now he could have supported Joel's father and helped him make the organization stronger than it was. But David had been young, a rookie interested in little more than recklessly killing Chiropterans and seeking revenge for his father's death . . . not at all unlike Kai.

In the end, David had severed himself from the pained heart of the previous generation and distanced himself from Red Shield activities.

What had cleared his head was a man strong enough to rival the influences of Diva, the tough and well-organized son of Red Shield's last leader—the Joel Goldschmidt of this generation.

David remembered the face of the boy as he had stood in front of his father's casket. There had been no tears in his eyes.

David had been the one who had given him the diary.

With his father's death behind him, and possessing the knowledge of the Goldschmidt history—including the crimes of his ancestors—a teenaged Joel had made a sacred vow in his heart to accept the past and fulfill his duty to the future . . .

He was kind like his father, grew up strong, and became close comrades with the combat-driven David.

Now here he sat, face to face with the Chevaliers, the ones leading the Chiropterans, who had driven his father to his death.

"My humble apologies for not sending a proper invitation."

Anshel picked two glasses off the tray held by a passing waiter and handed one of them to Joel.

"Won't you share a toast with me?"

The thick silver ring wrapped around Anshel's middle finger flashed in the light, and beads of sweat rose on David's back. The Chevalier who had mimicked Elizaveta in Russia—it was him. They had come here to confirm whether or not he was a Chevalier. It would have been easier had he been less friendly.

"Of course. That's why we are here."

Joel seemed to see through David's anxiety. Without batting an eyelash he took the glass.

"Cheers."

Human and Chiropteran touched their goblets, and a cool clink rang out softly, sending ripples through the amber champagne.

Joel brought the expensive-looking glass to his lips and took a sip of its contents without hesitation.

"I understand you have a new biotech enterprise which has brought you to America."

"I should have known you would have already heard about it. We're breaking new ground in advanced biochemical synthesis."

"Really? Fascinating . . . but it sounds a bit risky." Joel's tone was bland, but he kept his gaze locked on Anshel, hunting for any change in his posture or expression.





"Yes, of course. If we cannot face danger, then nothing will ever change. An organization that ignores innovations and just recycles the same approaches day in and day out will eventually die off. New blood is the key to the future."

"Regardless of danger or damage? Regardless of cost?"

"It sounds as if you speak from experience."

"I do. But rather than jump toward the future blindly, I am the type to sort through the past for answers first. You know," Joel added, "the head of the family six generations ago was much like you."

"Oh? The first Joel Goldschmidt . . . he is one person *I always wished I could have met.*"

Anshel's words of admiration were tinged with irony.

No one knew more about the first Joel than he.

"It seems that a reputation as a mysterious eccentric has become a Goldschmidt family tradition."

"We are born, breathe, and think just like all other people."

"Yes—and if you cut a person, it will bleed." A smugly superior judgment of humanity slipped from between Anshel's goateed lips.

David's muscles tensed and he became conscious of the location of the pistol in his jacket. However, Joel responded coolly, "Sometimes that is the cost of settling a debt."

"Sometimes such debts cost us more than we expect." Anshel's eyes traveled to Joel's legs.

The loss of the use of the lower half of his body had been the price Joel had paid for trying to fulfill his duty by destroying the Chiropterans.

But even in the face of Anshel's mocking threat, Joel's expression did not waver. "Losing the ability to dance was a small price for learning to enjoy listening to music."

The area around Anshel's eyes quivered as he tried to suppress his smile. No doubt he had concluded from Joel's retort that Diva's upcoming performance would be the site of their final battle.

The young Joel Goldschmidt was one of those rare people who turned defects into advantages and setbacks into fortune. And he had encountered plenty of setbacks: despite his almost endless financial resources, he had lost the use of half his body and more than half of his soldiers, making it harder than ever to continue Red Shield's fight. But his audacity in the face of his enemy didn't falter.

"In autumn we are sponsoring an opera that will play at the Metropolitan. I'll be sure to send a written invite." Anshel, too, proved willing to stir the pot.

Joel didn't decline his gesture, but didn't accept it, either.

"I couldn't possibly. It's more enjoyable if I can buy my own ticket."

"You are quite the conscientious individual."

Joel responded to Anshel's comment—equal parts admiration and disdain—by setting his glass on the table.

"Let's meet again soon." He turned to David. "Shall we be off?"

"Yes."

David agreed as he grasped the handles to Joel's wheelchair and began to turn away. He pushed the chair faster than the electric motor could carry it, feeling the gaze of the Chevalier pierce his back.



"That now, could it be . . ."

As Van Argeno crossed the garden transformed into assembly hall, what caught his attention was not the young man seated in the wheelchair, but the older man with him who appeared to be his subordinate. That man's rigid profile stirred an uncomfortable memory.

"Hamilton . . . no, Red Shield . . ."

He didn't know the man's real name. When he had broken into the research facility in England, his ID tag had said, "Hamilton," but Van seemed to remember someone having called him "David." Of course, that was probably an alias, as well.

Van remembered the humiliation of being taken hostage in order to help the man escape. Instead of feeling gratitude for having his life spared, Van had resented being tossed into the garbage chute and embarrassed in front of his subordinates.

But this was neither the time nor the place for confrontations.

This was a Goldsmith-sponsored party. This mansion was the home of Nathan Mahler, a close friend of Anshel's. Van wasn't going to be the one responsible for bullets flying through the grounds.

"Forget about it. Water under the bridge," Van told himself. He moistened his dry mouth with a sip of champagne, then popped a butterscotch candy between his lips.

The Corpse Corps research center, which had operated under the front of a foodstuffs laboratory, was already long gone. Moving the Cinq Flèches Group base to North America had also meant bringing along all the necessary facilities from Europe.

It could be that the remaining remnants of Red Shield were showing they were aware of this movement. It was too bad for them: in their weakened state, there was nothing they could do to halt the Delta Project.

As Van walked to a table his gaze moved off of the wheelchair.

After he saw Joel Goldschmidt off, Anshel started to chuckle. “. . . Just like a snake,” he told Van. “Until you’ve crushed its skull, you must be prepared for anything.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing. Any word from Solomon?”

“No, not yet . . .”

Already two weeks had passed since the CEO of Cinq Flèches, Solomon Goldsmith, had severed communications. He had last seen him headed for Christina Island for Diva’s shoot, but since then, Van had no idea where Solomon had gone or what he might be doing.

By the nature of his position, Solomon should have been the one to direct the transfer of the entire corporation to America, but that responsibility had fallen on Van’s shoulders.

Van had grown accustomed to his young manager’s fickle nature, but Solomon had incredible business sense and always put the company first. He had never abandoned his post like this in Van’s memory.

However, Anshel didn’t seem angered by Solomon’s insolence.

“Well, well. So, Van Argeno.”

“Yes.”

“I hope you are ready to take over as the new CEO of Cinq Flèches America.”

"Wha . . . ?!" Van had not expected Anshel's sudden offer.

Cinq Flèches was the world's leading pharmaceutical company with branch offices and factories spread all over the world. And now, Anshel wanted Van to be at the head of this global operation . . . ?

"That is all."

Anshel turned to walk away before Van remembered to show his gratitude.

It didn't seem real. "Me? CEO?"

His fingers shook so much that Van had trouble pulling a fresh piece of candy from his breast pocket. The first piece of candy was still in his mouth, but that didn't stop Van from throwing a second one in.

It was then that his lips slowly curled into a smile.

His body was like lead.

The city was crowded with people walking the sidewalks, and taking a car meant sitting in a traffic jam. Before he knew it, an entire day had passed by. This was a different kind of fatigue than the stress of fighting Chiropterans. His legs felt heavy as they carried Kai from the elevator.

The hotel they were staying at was top of the line, and Joel had arranged for them to stay in the most expensive suites there, but that would all end next week.

"Why pick such a rundown apartment . . . ?"

"It's fine. And the rent is cheap."

Kai held two heavy paper bags, and Mao held out her keycard to him.

With his hands full, Kai couldn't take the card. She dropped it into his jacket pocket.

"Even though you are rich, you seem aware of the value of money."

"I learned that from my father. Spend whatever it takes to get what you need. But don't use a penny on whatever you don't. You can't make money by wasting money."

"Whatever it takes . . . even killing?"

"I wouldn't know about that."

Okamura had whispered the question into Kai's ear, and Kai grimaced as he responded.

Since David and Louis were out with Joel today, the job of finding an apartment was left to Kai, Mao, and Okamura. Kai expected that the three of them would be finding an apartment in Los Angeles or San Francisco, as David wanted an investigation to happen on the West Coast.

Joel was funding this expedition, and Kai was still getting accustomed to the layout of New York City. The real-estate agent had been all smiles until confronted with the shameless and journalistically precise negotiation style of Okamura. Mao being Mao, the daughter of a real-estate baron, she watched the proceedings with a close eye. In a city this crowded, finding an apartment that fit their needs might have been impossible for Kai on his own.

"Otonashi. We brought dinner home . . . What, is she already asleep?"

Mao took off her jacket and dropped it on the living-room sofa as she called out, but, realizing she was getting no response, she headed toward the bedrooms.

Setting down the bags of hamburgers, doughnuts, and pizza on the dining table, Kai followed Mao to Saya's bedroom and knocked on the door.

"Saya?"

The lights were turned off, but they could see Hagi was in the room.

He was sitting in a chair in front of the window. He was gazing at Saya as she slept soundly in her bed.

"Please allow her to rest now."

"But what about dinner? We bought so much—and she's always so hungry."

Mao put both hands on her hips and sounded like a nagging mother when she spoke.

"I want her to have some time when she can forget her battle and find peace."

". . . Of course."

Kai responded to Hagi's words with understanding.

Hagi stood from his chair, lifted up his cello case, and stepped out of the room. Kai watched closely as Hagi walked past Mao, who hadn't conceded, before returning his gaze to his sister's bed.

"What's up with these two?"

"Who knows?" Kai brushed off Mao's gripes as he looked at Saya's sleeping face.

Despite the bright light coming from the living room, Saya did not stir.

Saya's lips moved slightly.

". . . Yeah . . . I can eat more . . ."

She was talking in her sleep.



Kai looked at Mao and stifled a chuckle.

She must have been dreaming about eating her fill. She sounded just like the girl sitting at the counter at Omoro after coming home from track practice, with George spooning another serving of his cooking onto her plate.

There were no visible traces at the mansion that a party had been held there the day before. The tables, chairs, tents, and giant platform constructed for the party had been removed from the central garden. Naturally, the quiet chatter of all the guests had disappeared as well.

The water in the pool was still, with only light ripples forming from the occasional breeze.

The rear garden behind the house was restricted to outsiders, and the usually happy artist, Nathan Mahler, was having one of his famous mood swings.

Solomon Goldsmith was one of his few friends who had permission to enter the garden uninvited.

From the cool grove facing the mansion, Solomon walked forward, sensing a strange heaviness as he drew near.

What was going to happen next would probably make the mood worse for the other Chevaliers, but Solomon was feeling proud of the path he had chosen to walk.

It was because it was the truth.

He would die to preserve this feeling of complete honesty with not an iota of lies. He would not hesitate. His heart had crossed over, and it felt good breathing the morning air.

Solomon noticed a white sparkle in the shadow of the tall trees.

The small figure of a person came from the mansion towards him. She looked more like a dancer walking on the air than someone taking an early morning stroll.

Diva.

“...”

She noticed him, and a smile appeared on the face that looked just like Saya's younger brother's.

As Solomon's jet-black suit soaked up the sunlight, he stepped toward her and kneeled down.

“I have been out of contact.”

He took her hand and pressed his lips against her soft skin.

Surely she sensed the change in her knight, but she didn't reject him.

Solomon looked up and into his queen's blue eyes. Beyond her pupils he sensed the feelings of caring and goodwill that had always been there.

“Solomon. What brings you here now?”

The voice, rigid with anger, came from another direction.

Solomon stood up and looked behind Diva's back. Standing with their backs to the mansion stood Anshel and Nathan.

“I came to speak with Diva.”

“Speak with Diva?”

It had been months since he had seen his older brother, and Solomon never remembered seeing the angry crease in the center of his forehead as pronounced as it was at that moment. Solomon had never fallen out of his brothers' good graces before. It was the first time Anshel had gazed at him with so much rage.

But Solomon disregarded Anshel's anger as meaningless, and he ignored Nathan's curious stare.

He was there to talk not to them, but to Diva.

"Do you remember the first time you and I met?"

"You were wearing white." Diva responded as if she were talking about something that had happened only the day before.

The black-clad Solomon closed his eyes for a moment as he thought back upon that memory.

"At that time I was nothing more than the youngest brother in the Goldsmith family. It was the first time we were able to prosper from war by establishing a network of banks and insurance companies. For the sake of the family's interests, I enlisted in the army. But I was more interested in helping people than killing people."

*I want to go to school and learn medicine.*

That had been Solomon's dream in those days.

But at that time, the patriarch of the Goldsmith family had been more conservative and old-fashioned when it came to allowing others to fulfill personal desires.

The pursuit of knowledge was not discouraged, but it was generally only supported in the oldest child, and the younger siblings were encouraged to enter the family business as quickly as possible and work their way up the professional ladder.

Having someone in the military provided a good connection to the Goldsmiths, as they were urgently pursuing that link as a part of a larger plan. Solomon didn't like placing his own ambition behind the family's goals. It was a waste of his talents.

"I had violated the family's wishes and left, but the one who picked me up was Anshel-niisan."

At that time, Solomon had referred to Anshel as his uncle.

Anshel was treated with high regard in the Goldsmith family, and he took his rebellious nephew under his wing and supported him through college.

“And then, by the end of the Great War, when I was finally able to stand on my own, as an independent physician . . . It was in the basement of his castle that I met you.”

Her beautiful naked body had been splayed on the stone floor. The image of her blue eyes, looking up at him suspiciously, was etched permanently in Solomon’s memory.

He had accepted her blood, and at that moment, the human Solomon Goldsmith had died, and Diva’s third knight had been born.

Since that day, Solomon had called Anshel his brother.

“Then, I became your Chevalier . . .”

Diva looked at him with eyes unchanged from that first moment and smiled.

Until now, Solomon had lived to protect her.

“After I became a Chevalier, I was freed of the conflict and strife of the human existence, and it felt like not only I, but that the whole world had changed. The war was ending, and it seemed like beautiful peace and order were being restored.”

But that was the folly of youth, before he had tasted the cloying tonic of pessimism.

At some point all children grow angry at the despair and absurdity of the world around them and long for flawless purity. It is a lofty pursuit, but they find when they reach for

that extreme that there is nothing left behind to hold on to, and then that their destination, too, is unreachable.

"I had been given eternal life, and with my new eyes, I saw shortsighted humans acting chaotically for worthless ends."

"..."

As Diva listened to his story, she walked across the rocks and plucked a rose from a vine wrapped around a pillar.

"Looking at human values, it seemed to me that all paths led to anguish. Humans were fools who lived ugly lives. And I had been liberated from that world..."

It had been the first time he touched real tranquility.

From the human world of conflict and discrimination and poverty and violence, flawless purity was impossible. Among all living creatures, only humans fostered hatred, envy, sadism, and superiority. They had developed hungers which increased in intensity until satisfied. With that power, mankind had stood strong against natural disasters, disease, and the very laws of nature.

The ugliness of humans was not worthless. It was the foundation of their strength.

A few people might progress beyond humanity—an artist here, a mass murderer there. But even that was not enough. One vital ingredient was missing.

Only Diva's blood would bring out that transcendence in a chosen few.

Solomon had been the one to slip away from the business.

And then he was welcomed back.

Viewing the world from outside the limited scope of human life had gradually calmed Solomon's soul.

“...”

Now, Anshel stared at Solomon in silence, and the usually talkative Nathan looked on with his arms folded in front of his chest. Perhaps they remembered that progression as well. When they changed from human to Chevalier it must have felt like emerging from a shell for them, too.

“But, our world was no utopia,” Solomon continued. “There was conflict—the fight between you and Saya.”

That battle had started long before Solomon had become a Chevalier.

Diva responded without so much as a shrug or a smile. “It was Saya-neesama who wanted to fight.”

“Yes, I know.” Solomon wanted to make it clear that he wasn’t going to attempt to discredit her bitter feelings.

Diva simply killed humans. But there were times when those humans had been people important to Saya, people whose values she embraced. That was why Saya was acting out this silly revenge play.

“But I don’t see her as an enemy,” Solomon explained.

“I want her dead.”

“I know.”

Everything seemed to disappear from the grove but the light and shadow, and a sudden silence fell over them.

As if she were examining something strange, Diva walked in a circle around Solomon.

By the time she had returned to the starting point she looked more like her twin than she had in a long time.

The girl who now resembled Saya gazed at Solomon.

"You . . . you love Saya-neesama." It wasn't a question, but a statement of her belief. Her offhand tone didn't match the sharpness of her glare.

After half a moment of hesitation, Solomon responded in the affirmative.

"... I love her."

Diva's blue eyes trembled so slightly it would have been easy for Solomon to have not caught it.

"So I do not want to see her die," he went on.

"Even if she kills me?"

Her face looked like a boy's once again, and she tilted her head mockingly.

It was a terrifying question.

Solomon loved Saya, but at the same time had a deep connection to Diva. He couldn't see himself wishing for her death.

However, his silence was all the answer Diva needed.

She sniffed the rose in her hand and giggled as she spoke again.

"I want to live along with Saya-neesama. But I also want to kill her, so badly."

Spheres of blood formed between the fingers squeezing the rose stem. Solomon couldn't take his eyes off of the red threads running down the white skin of her arm.

Diva disappeared.

The rose she had been holding hung for a moment in the air before falling softly to the ground.

Solomon's eyes followed the petals up toward where Anshel was standing. Diva had wrapped herself around one of his arms and had her back to Solomon.

“Do as you like. As of today, you are no longer my Chevalier. You are Solomon, the Chevalier who strayed off the path.” She spoke the words without venom.

Either Diva was carefully controlling the emotion in her voice, or she had already forgiven him. Solomon wasn’t sure which.

Until now, he had always been a dedicated and faithful knight to Diva. His service to his queen had not been a lie, but focusing all of his attention toward her had meant ignoring what he was feeling in his heart. There had been no call to worry about anything but her needs. Her gratification was his gratification.

Today, Solomon had revealed his true feelings to Diva for the first time. New emotions had sprouted in his heart—things she couldn’t agree to—and he had shared them with her honestly.

Solomon wondered how Diva had felt after hearing the truth. She loved freedom.

Once, she had amused herself by going on killing sprees with the wild and unstable Karl. That was when she had really felt like she was living. Karl had a pure heart and had loved her unconditionally.

But at some point, Karl began to feel more strongly for Saya than he did for Diva.

Diva had rejected Karl, but she hadn’t attacked him. He had followed his own desires, and in the end they killed him. The tragedy in Karl’s case was that he hadn’t known his own soul. He hadn’t known if what he needed was Diva or Saya . . . or just anyone to love him.

While Karl had depended on Diva’s love, he also had pined for Saya’s attention, leading to his ultimate demise.



On the other hand, it wasn't inconceivable that Karl's death had simply been the form of Diva's punishment.

Regardless, Solomon was sure of one thing. He and Karl were different. His affections weren't split, as Karl's had been.

He only had one goal in mind.

Saya's love. That was all.

The love he had given to Diva in the past was not so different from the love he was offering Saya now. His eternal existence would be dedicated to proving his feelings to Saya.

*Goodbye, my queen.*

Diva detached herself from Anshel and walked toward the mansion. Solomon watched her back with sorrow and gratitude.

But this separation would be far from graceful.

From the shade of the trees Anshel appeared to be sucking in the darkness around him as he swelled with rage.

"Surely you were not planning on leaving here just like that."

"There is no purpose in us fighting."

The only thing that could kill a Chevalier was the blood of a queen.

"Want to give me a try?" Anshel's voice quivered.

The air stood still. The low rumble of the breath escaping from Anshel's lips was followed by a long silence as the atmosphere vibrated.

The next moment, the serenity was shattered. Solomon's ears rang.

Something closed in on him quickly and the next thing he knew, his right arm had been cut off above the elbow and had fallen to his feet. He felt no pain, and it took a few moments for the blood to flow.

Nathan let out a long sigh as if reaching the end of a long day of sightseeing.

The air rippled.

This was the first time Solomon had seen Anshel use his full power as a Chevalier. However, Solomon remained calm. He knew that his own arsenal held surprises for Anshel, too.

He had fought Chevaliers and the Schiff countless times, and he knew how to sever a Chevalier's strength. When it came to battle, Solomon was the more experienced of the brothers.

Solomon picked up his arm and set it back where it belonged. In mere seconds, the edges bonded together, and his arm was fully restored.

He flexed his fingers, and once he confirmed everything was in good shape, he raised his head up.

"... If that is truly what you want ..."

Solomon hoisted his right arm and glared at his brother with crimson eyes.

His right arm had transformed into a silver blade and faintly reflected the light.

"Doesn't matter. Come."

As Anshel's response met his ears, Solomon leapt off the ground.

At the same time his vision of Anshel rippled away like water and shot at him with an explosive burst of air that left Solomon's blade ringing from the impact.

The empty air split open.

Solomon's blade reflected the sonic attack and sent it hurtling back toward Anshel.

The air pressure rose again. Anshel must have been able to defend against the sonic boom by moving faster than the speed of sound. His footfalls ripped up turf and turned the air the color of mud.

Solomon cast himself into the cloud of dust stirred by the moving dirt, charging toward Anshel.

Anshel did not raise an eyebrow as he stopped and let out a breath.

That air pocket slammed into Solomon with a blow many times harder than a shotgun's blast.

However, all that was hit was Solomon's afterimage—the younger Chevalier had already jumped out of the way. As the burst tore through a stone pillar, Solomon was already at Anshel's back.

Without a word, Solomon plunged his blade towards the top of Anshel's exposed spine.

The finely honed edge of Solomon's blade would have burned through even James's armor. At that speed, there was nothing in this world that could stop it. If it cut through his neck, even a Chevalier would have had trouble recovering.

But right then—

A melodious voice drained away Solomon's desire to kill.

"All right, that's enough!"

Nathan clapped both hands together and was soon standing near his older brothers with a giant smile on his face.

"This is my house. If I let this go any further I will have to look for a new place to live."

"..."

The tip of Solomon's blade had stopped just at the nape of Anshel's neck, burning only the ends of his hair. The blade of the sword still hummed and the atmosphere around it was warped by its heat.

In that moment Solomon was able to settle any question regarding whether or not he was able to take his eldest brother down.

Still looking straight ahead, Anshel stretched his right hand back toward Solomon's chest.

His five fingers, spread open like an eagle's talons, grasped the compressed air, shaping it into another ball of lightning.

"And, Anshel, if it's punishing Solomon you're worried about, why not save that job for James?"

"Hmm. That could be fun, too."

Anshel squeezed the orb in his hand until it burst and dissipated, then pulled his arm back.

Solomon lowered his blade. His arm returned to its usual form, but the sleeves of his jacket and shirt were still charred.

"James . . . ?"

So James, who had been cut down by Saya on Christina Island, was still alive? Even if they had managed to save his life, the parts of his body that had crystallized could not have been regenerated. There was no way he could be in fight-ready condition.

Anshel straightened his collar and turned around.

"Solomon. You said you love Saya, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I am only saying that I want you to remember that your duty and Chevalier instincts are toward your queen."

"And if I do, are you saying my love for Diva won't trump my own needs?"

That was the nature of love.

"My affection for Diva has not changed. I am proud to have been her Chevalier. But above all, I am myself."

He was one of Diva's Chevaliers, but he was also Solomon, the man. He remembered that fact during the night in Vietnam when he had first met Saya.

"I am Solomon Goldsmith, and I will live my life with Saya."

". . ."

Anshel turned away from his younger brother's words.

Nathan was not smiling, and Solomon felt a sense of respect in his gaze.

Anshel stepped forward and stood next to Nathan.

". . . Solomon. No matter how much you want to become Saya's Chevalier, it will never be. If you attempt to make Saya your queen, she will kill you. We will kill Saya before that happens."

"I will—protect her."

If his brothers were planning on killing Saya, then Solomon Goldsmith would make every effort to fight them off. And that would make Diva his enemy.

Anshel pulled his hand off Solomon's shoulder.

"To die for love . . . I see now."

Anshel's shoulder hit him as he walked past but Solomon didn't turn around.

He knew this would be the last time he would talk to his brothers. And he had no regrets.

"I'll give you until tomorrow. At daybreak, you will be our enemy."

As he heard Anshel's words, Solomon was already walking in the opposite direction.

The morning sunlight had already lit the garden path.

It had been about a month since they had arrived in New York.

During that time, the weather had warmed up dramatically. The smells of winter had faded into the now gone spring days, and summer had officially made its claim on the city.

Mao had left Los Angeles International and crossed the entire U.S., only to have an equally hot sun meet her at her arrival.

"It's so hot . . . It's just as bad as the West Coast."

Surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and glass, the heat of the big city was not completely unbearable for Mao, who had been born and raised in Okinawa.

Unfortunately, today she had too much luggage. Different changes of clothes and makeup were stuffed into the heavy Boston bag weighing down on her shoulder. The straps from her pumps were rubbing blisters into the tops of her feet.

Okamura, dragging a trunk, huffed and groaned like he had a hangover.

"Isn't it ironic? Thanks to your selfishness, we made it out alive."

"That's not the proper way to thank someone."

"Thanks? Don't you see who's carrying your luggage?"

Inside the trunk were more of Mao's things. All Okamura had brought was his camera bag and a change of underwear.

No matter how lazy or crummy a reporter he was, he couldn't complain about his financial backing. Mao was his sponsor and intended to cover all necessary expenses. She had bought him new socks when holes grew in his old ones, and she hadn't questioned his film budget once.

When she had found out that David had an investigation for them to carry out in Los Angeles—this was another reason they couldn't live together—she was the one who had arranged to rent a place.

But now it was gone.

It had happened two days before.

Mao had gone to the airport to arrange their tickets when she called Okamura on his cell to arrange a car to pick her up. Just as Okamura was headed into the parking lot, an explosion had destroyed their apartment.

According to the fire department, the explosion was caused by a gas leak, but if Okamura had left the apartment one minute later, he would have been caught right in the middle of it.

They had access to nearly half a million dollars via the cash card safely tucked away in Mao's purse, so they hadn't needed to worry about paying for anything, but they had still needed a place to stay. They first thought about a motel or a hotel, but they hadn't wanted to waste the money.

So they had recovered whatever they could from the apartment and replaced the rest, then headed to the LA airport to fly to New York, where they would join the Red Shield cell already there.

"This place is a dump..." A line of sweat slid down Okamura's chin as he looked up at the apartment building.

*Historic* was the term on the brochures, but as far as Okamura could tell, *old* summed it up just as well.

"What are you worried about? It's not like you expected a Park Avenue penthouse. The rent is one-sixth the market price, and it has an elevator and air conditioning."

As a daughter of a real-estate man, Mao felt confident about their choice.

But then that self-confidence faced the "Out of Order" sign in the elevator and gave a sideways glance to the spiral staircase before finally caving in on itself once they had finally gotten to the apartment itself.

"Yo. You guys had it rough, too."

"What was it? A gas explosion, I hear?"

The sight of Kai and Louis stopped Mao in her tracks.

"... What're ... you doing here ... like that?"

Everyone in the room was dressed lightly. They were fanning themselves with hand fans or magazines. They had their feet in a wading pool full of water in the center of the room in a scene that looked like it could have been from a photograph of the New York of decades ago.

"We had no other choice."

As usual, David's eyebrows drew together as he spoke. But that was all that was usual about his appearance—his jacket was off and his shirt was open. His usually pressed slacks were rolled up, and his feet were in the water. He looked just a little more together than an old man who had been drinking rice brandy at an Okinawa *izakaya* all afternoon.

Mao slapped her hand against her forehead. "Isn't there an air



conditioner? This apartment was supposed to come with one."

"It's busted. This is how it is until the repairman gets here," Kai explained.

David seemed oblivious to the crisis. "It's better than a Gulf desert."

"I'm feeling like a boiled octopus." Louis was dressed appropriately, in a Hawaiian shirt, and he wiped the sweat from his brow. Maybe the heat would help him lose a little weight.

David went on. "What we found out is that Diva is planning a performance at the Metropolitan Opera House for September eleventh. Now, as you can see, we are honing our underwater skills."

"But you are only getting your feet wet!" Mao reacted loudly to David's deadpan addition to the conversation. "I feel sorry for Otonashi, being the only girl stuck with you guys . . . Say, where is Otonashi?"

"She's still asleep."

"Still?"

Mao was surprised by Kai's answer and checked the time on her cell phone. It was already the afternoon.

"She hasn't been well lately." Kai sounded concerned and he wiped his face with the towel hanging around his neck.

That answer told Mao what she needed to know.

"Oh, I see."

She could think of one obvious reason a girl Saya's age would be feeling ill. Mao didn't have to think too hard to figure it out, but as she looked around the living room, no one else seemed to catch on. Kai, David, Louis, and Okamura all stared at her blankly.

Mao felt sorry for Saya once again.

"So this is what it's like in an all-male household . . ."

After a few seconds of knocking on the bedroom door, a voice finally answered back.

"Yes?"

"Hiya!" Mao opened the door and spoke with an optimistic tone as she greeted the younger girl.

In actual years, Mao wasn't much older, but she couldn't help but see Saya as Kai's little sister, even if Kai probably didn't see her that way anymore.

"Jahana-san?"

"How are you feeling?"

"OK, thank you," Saya replied, as she sat up on the bed, which made Mao feel better. However, the Saya she remembered from Okinawa was a girl who smiled in almost any situation. The smile she forced now was clearly for Mao's sake.

"Your face doesn't say that you're fine."

Saya needed to show her true expression. Just as Hagi had said, one needed time to forget about battle, and at the very least, she should have that.

Mao found Hagi's constant presence in Saya's room irritating. He might have been so handsome it was hard to look away from him, but he was still as thickheaded as Kai.

"Hey, all men out! Out!"

"But . . ." Hagi put up a little resistance as Mao pushed him out the door into the hallway.

"Hagi, you can wait in the living room." Saya's words helped get the tall man out the door.

"See ya later!" Mao smiled as she sent him away and then turned and walked over to Saya's bed. The bedroom faced away from the sun, so the heat and the humidity weren't so bad.

"You are having a little trouble, I hear. Is there something I can pick up for you?"

"Ah, no, not really . . ."

"Really? Something to eat? Do you think you can keep something down? Or do you have any laundry I can take care of? I'm happy to help."

"No, really, it's fine."

Saya seemed a little confused. Thinking about it, Mao remembered that other than Saya, the Miyagusukus' house had consisted of Kai, Riku and George. All men. Saya must not have been used to having people look out for her like this.

"Please, don't say no to be polite. This works both ways, you know."

Mao turned to the window and opened the curtain. Saya squinted in the sudden light.

"Yes, thank you . . ."

"Oh, yeah. Breakfast . . . even though it's a little late. Anyway, what would you like?"

"Um . . . let's see . . . I'll have—"

"I got it. I got it. You just wait right here."

Mao put a hand on Saya's shoulder, then spun around and pranced out of the room.

This was a perfect opportunity; Mao wanted to be able to get Saya to eat a proper meal. Louis, the culinary expert, was in the apartment, so there shouldn't have been anything to worry about, but chances were they had been getting takeout more often than not. That couldn't be healthy for a girl Saya's age. What she needed was scrambled eggs on a fresh green salad, a croissant, and an espresso . . . an elegant breakfast.

Mao heated a frying pan over the stove in the kitchen and added a little salad oil before preparing an egg to drop in.

"Ouch . . . hot hot hot."

She had cracked the shell on the edge of the pan and dropped the contents in, but oil splashed back against the tips of her fingers.

She could hear David, Okamura, and the others talking the living room.

"Check this out."

Okamura pulled a digital-camera memory stick from his vest pocket.

He inserted the memory stick into the laptop computer on top of the table and opened up the viewer, revealing the stored digital videos. The picture wasn't perfectly clear, but it was still obvious what was going on.

The scene took place in a fancy-looking restaurant, a top-tier spot in the Michelin Guide.

The waiter who had brought the wine in from the back stood in front of the table that ordered it, showing the label so the patrons could confirm it was correct.

Just then, the customer's head arched back violently.

Blood sprayed across the wall and tablecloth.

Bullets pierced his heart and forehead, and Anshel Goldsmith collapsed on the floor.

No matter how you looked at it, those should have been fatal wounds.

The waiter quickly stepped back, trying to maintain his composure as the other customers realized what had happened and the restaurant dissolved into chaos.

"I couldn't get anyone to talk, so I threw this video up on the Internet."

The restaurant where the incident had occurred was open and running like nothing had ever happened. Okamura had tried talking with the owner, but he wouldn't acknowledge that Anshel had been assassinated. He had tried to contact some of the eyewitnesses who had been at the scene, but no one had been willing to talk about it. Goldsmith had Europe under its thumb, and it appeared that power had spread across the Atlantic to America.

If the victim hadn't really been hurt, there was no point in the police searching for a suspect.

The footage from a single hidden camera was the only evidence that the event actually had taken place. A lot of effort had been made to keep this video hidden. Okamura had decided to draw out the participants.

He had posted the video on a free video-hosting site, and the response had been superb. No, the response had been even better than expected.

"The 'gas explosion' that destroyed your apartment must have been arranged by someone who wasn't happy about the release of that footage." David gave his opinion with his fingers interlocked together and Okamura agreed. From the outside, it had looked like a leaky gas pipe, but according to firefighters who had been inside, it had been no accident.

Kai pointed to Anshel on the computer screen. "Couldn't it have been him?"

"I don't think so. He is sinister, but that isn't his style. Besides, he is showing his face openly at parties now."

That was the former CIA agent in Louis talking.

It didn't seem likely that Anshel had given a second thought to the video going up on the Internet, regardless of who had posted it.

Okamura spoke up. "The Chevaliers are not going to expose themselves. But I could see Van Argeno and his cronies running around trying to put out the fire."

Cinq Flèches had no time to deal with adverse publicity as it prepared to open its doors in the U.S. It would have been very like Argeno to insert himself into the situation like that. He could fan the flames in one direction, drawing attention away from Cinq Flèches, concluded Okamura.

"But it was a different fish that took the bait."

"That's right." Louis confirmed Kai's statement. He rewound the video and indicated one corner of the frame.

Before the waiter had shot Anshel, he had taken an order from two men seated at another table.

"These two must be the go-betweens for the assassin and whoever ordered the hit. If you watch them closely, you'll see that they are both looking at Anshel right before the shots are fired. They know what's about to happen."

They were the fish that had been caught in Argeno's net—and probably part of whatever gang had blown up the apartment.

With eyes as cold as glaciers, David stared at the screen as the two men put on their suit jackets.

"I've seen them before. They were guests at Nathan Mahler's party last month."

"So, what do we do now?"

"Make sure this video stays on the Net. Let's try to gather as much info as we can on whoever ordered the assassination."

"What about Diva?"

Okamura and Mao had gone to LA not only to investigate the attempt on Anshel's life, but also to get information on Diva's performance schedule.

America was a big place. It wasn't like Japan, where all information was concentrated in Tokyo. Places like Washington and New York were complicated enough on their own. Then, when it came to music and celebrities, you had to go to the West Coast, to Hollywood and Las Vegas, for sources.

What Okamura had learned from his LA connections was the rumor that, before her performance at the Metropolitan, Diva would be rehearsing on a rented stage.

Unfortunately, the stage was in an air force base in Ohio.

"Is she really going to perform live at a military base?"

Kai's expression reflected his disbelief, but Okamura had confirmed the rumor with military officers and subcontractors working on the event hall.

"No mistake about it. The director, Nathan Mahler, is quite an eccentric and is looking to construct a really outlandish stage."

"And this is happening next month?"

"Yes. No mistaking that, either."

"Hmm . . ."

David rubbed his chin as he contemplated this information, but Okamura already knew what he was going to say.

It could very well be a trap, but he couldn't help but want to check it out.

Mao could hear the male voices coming from the living room but nothing they said surprised her.

She had already suspected the explosion that had taken away her comfortable home had not been an accident. Okamura hadn't told her that directly, but she had figured it out on her own. Okamura might have been proud of his sponsor, but he still saw Mao as a child.

She had wanted to help Saya and Kai—and the others—in their battle. With that in mind, she had chosen to cooperate with Red Shield. And yet, was she truly prepared to fight? She knew it was a battle with lives on the line, but seeing it with her own eyes had been incredibly frightening . . .

Whenever things got unreasonable in Okinawa, her father usually tried to settle it with money. Sometimes paid muscle



would try to make a score for weaker gangs, but once they heard the name Jahana Syndicate, they usually quickly turned around with their tails between their legs.

However, they weren't in Okinawa any longer. Her father couldn't do anything to help her, and her new enemies were monsters and military men. What could a high-school girl do to help that cause?

Maybe it was time to make a decision.

A while back Kai had told Mao frankly that it would be better if she went back to Okinawa.

"..."

Mao remembered the plane ticket stuffed in the pocket of her jeans and bit her lip. When she bought her ticket to New York at the counter at Los Angeles International, Mao had also booked another ticket.

This one had a layover at Narita before reaching Naha Airport.

"... Whoops."

She noticed the smoke rising before her eyes and quickly lifted the frying pan off the stove.

Mao hadn't been concentrating on the scrambled eggs burning in the pan.

"Oh well."

It wasn't like they were so burned they would kill anybody, so Mao cut away the black parts and put the rest on a plate. She then added the half-burned bacon, a grapefruit cut in two, and a bowl of yogurt. She poured a cup of milk to complete Saya's breakfast. It was nothing fancy, but it would fit the bill.

Mao put all the dishes on a tray and headed back to Saya's bedroom. She timidly presented the meal to her.

"I'm really sorry. I've never really cooked anything before . . ."

As Mao apologized she looked closely at Saya, who sat on the bed and brought what looked like a fossilized chunk of egg to her mouth.

"No. It's delicious."

Those kind words alone brought tears to Mao's eyes.

"Otonashi . . . you really are a nice person. I wish I could give a little of your kindness to my father."

"Your father?"

"Check this out! I texted him after not talking to him for a while, and look what he sent back!"

Mao jumped from her seat next to the bed and opened up her cell phone.

The little picture showed a man's arm holding a newborn child, probably just minutes after birth. Its tiny mouth was stretched wide open.

"A baby?"

"He says it's my sister."

Right after she had texted her father from the airport the day before, he had replied with this picture. This was what happened when the daughter who depended on him ran away from home with half a million dollars, he had told her.

"She was born on the twenty-seventh of last month. My sister, eighteen years younger than me. I'm surprised my dad still has it in him, at his age."

She was joking, but she truly thought the baby looked very cute. No matter what the circumstances around its birth had

been, it was Mao's sister, and she wanted nothing more than to touch the baby's soft cheeks.

Saya smiled as if the image was calling to her, too.

"She is so cute . . ."

"Of course. She's my sister. Otonashi, once you get back to Okinawa you can come and see her."

"..."

Saya's face looked sad as she stared at the picture, and Mao panicked a little.

Was Saya that bothered by the thought of coming to Mao's house? *Jahana Syndicate* was just an unfortunate moniker. Her dad was really just a legitimate real-estate man, as Mao was about to explain when Saya lifted her head up.

"... Jahana-san, you always seemed like a scarier person to me."

Obviously she had heard the vicious rumors of the Jahana Syndicate. But her voice was serious.

"Scary? . . . That's hard to take from a person who uses a katana to slice up monsters on a regular basis!"

"You've got a point, there." Saya smiled and responded naturally, which made Mao feel a little more at ease. Saya's distractible nature wasn't always a bad feature. It made Mao laugh, too.

"Okinawa . . . It must be hot there now, too." Saya looked out the window at the clear New York weather when she spoke. "After this is over, we'll go home, right? I can see Kaori and run track . . . Oh, and shopping! You'll have to come shopping with Kaori and me!"

Thinking about it, Mao realized that she had never had a proper conversation with Saya back in Okinawa.

They had known each other, but they hadn't been friends. But things were different now. She could honestly say she liked seeing Saya's smiling face.

She didn't have the courage to fight at Saya's side like Kai did, but she could make sure she had a friend waiting for her back in Okinawa. And after the fighting was over and Saya made it back to Okinawa, it would be a good time to rekindle their friendship.

For a moment the color left Saya's face. She had the look of an elderly person who had given up on life, but then decorated over it with a smile.

"Yeah . . . when it's all over . . ."

It sounded more like resignation than a promise to Mao's ears.

". . . Can I get you a cup of coffee or something?" Mao stood up from her chair. When Saya didn't answer, she walked back to the kitchen and started cleaning the dishes, as she waited for the kettle to come to a boil.

She popped her head in the living room to check on Kai and the other men. "Who wants coffee?"

"We do."

Louis was probably the one who had picked up the expensive coffee beans. She ground the beans and put them in the filter, then poured the hot water into the dripper. After it had brewed, she poured the coffee into cups and took them to the living room.

"Here you are."

She placed four cups onto the table, and then carried the tray with her and Saya's cups back to the bedroom.

Someone behind her coughed.

"... That's a unique flavor."

It was David. Mao had heard he used to like the coffee a Red Shield woman named Julia had made. Maybe that's why he didn't appreciate Mao's coffee.

Mao was about to knock on the bedroom door again, but stopped. She could hear a voice coming from the other side of the door.

"The sleep is coming soon. Unless we do something . . ." It was Hagi. He couldn't stay away from Saya for long.

"I know. But . . ." Saya's voice sounded desperate and exhausted.

Mao sensed they were talking about something serious. But she wasn't one to eavesdrop.

"Hey, you aren't planning on going back to sleep, are you?" She broke in cheerfully as she pushed the door open. Both Saya, who was still sitting on the bed, and Hagi, standing near her, turned and looked at Mao.

Difficult conversations can sometimes be swept away with a joke, and Mao had hoped to make Saya laugh. She should have been trying to forget about the battle for as long as she possibly could. But Saya met her with a hard look, causing Mao to stop in her tracks.

"Wha-what . . . ?"

She felt her cheeks redden.

It was painfully clear that their conversation had been no laughing matter.

But she had a right to know. If she and Saya were really friends, she needed to hear what was happening before going back to Okinawa.

"How about telling me what's going on?" Mao spoke in a no-nonsense tone as she closed the door behind her.



The coffee cup Mao had set on the shelf had cooled, steam no longer rising over the rim.

She had already known that Saya was no normal human, so she hadn't expected to be surprised by what she heard. However, Saya had told a seemingly nonsensical story with a serious expression on her face.

"... Thirty years of sleep? ... How could that be?"

"I don't know why. But I do know that after I live two or three years like a normal person, I fall into a deep sleep for thirty years ..."

Mao remembered.

Saya had joined the Miyagusuku family a little over two years earlier. George had taken her in as an orphan, like Kai and Riku. But that hadn't really been the case. Saya had been asleep, and had only woken up shortly before she was taken into their home.

And since then, two years had already gone by.

"So will it start pretty soon?"

"Yes ... ." Saya answered Mao's question quietly, without looking up.

Mao's face darkened, and she raised her voice. "This is so important! Why haven't you told anyone?"

"I'm sorry ..."

"I don't need sorry!" Mao yelled, forgetting that the people in the living room would be able to hear her.

Saya kept her gaze on the ground and repeated, "... I'm sorry."

Her spirit sounded dead and what came from her mouth was as heartless as a reflex. It was hard for Mao to see Saya like this, even if Mao's gruff exterior hid her concern.

She pounded the sheets with her fists and drew closer to Saya. "So what did you mean earlier? 'Let's go back to Okinawa and go shopping together,' and 'I want to see your baby sister' . . . all lies?"

"I'm sor—"

"Don't apologize!"

In a flash, Mao slapped Saya's cheek with an open palm.

Saya reeled from the blow, but she still couldn't bring herself to look up at Mao. She didn't rub her red cheek with her fingers. She just stared straight down.

Even her Chevalier, whose only purpose in life was to protect his mistress, didn't move a muscle this time. Hagi only stood and watched, seeming to share her pain.

There was nothing to refute, so there was no response. To see Saya and Hagi like this was unbearable.

Mao stepped away from the bed.

She wanted to go to the living room to tell Kai and the others what she knew.

"Outta my way!"

Hagi's tall frame stood in her path, apparently to keep her from leaving. Mao put a hand up to his chest to push him aside.

"Wait! Don't tell them . . ." Saya's heartfelt plea stopped Mao in her tracks.

Mao turned around to see that Saya had pulled herself off the bed and was standing on the floor as she looked directly at her. Mao wouldn't back down and met her stare.

"I'm not mad because you lied to me! I'm mad that you didn't let anyone know these important things about you."

Mao understood that Saya had been trying to spare them heartache. But that didn't make it right. Saya wasn't the only one who was part of the fight.

"You are trying to carry all the burden and solve all the problems on your own . . . after all the support Kai and the others have given to you . . ."

"So?" Saya's punchy retort caught Mao off guard.

Saya was staring at her intently, and she was on the verge of tears. " . . . I didn't want them to know."

" . . ."

Mao squeezed her lips together to try to hide the pain she felt in her heart. Saya had given her a glimpse of her unfiltered agony.

Saya really was too nice . . .

If they had known, Kai and everyone else would have been sad. That's why Saya had decided not to tell anyone about it. There was a real chance that she and Kai wouldn't be together when she finally fell into the deep sleep. And so, in order to keep the things important to her from disintegrating, she held everything inside, and, when the time came, she was just going to disappear.

That way, Kai would be left with nothing but the good memories of his sister.

Perhaps her overabundance of sympathy and responsibility stemmed from the stress of being a nonhuman dealing with humans, and this seemed like the kindest solution. That level of consideration was very like Saya . . .



But Mao couldn't consent to it.

Absolutely not.

Just like Saya and Kai, Mao was committed to her beliefs.

"... I won't say anything."

She wouldn't mention the coming sleep to Kai or David. But that didn't mean she was going to do everything Saya's way.

"Jahana-san."

Saya's expression of relief and gratitude was cut short as Mao went on. "I will see your group's fight to the end. What are you talking about, *sleep*? You sleep, get up, and fight again!"

Mao picked up the dumbfounded Saya's hand and forcibly wrapped her pinky around Saya's, not letting Saya's eyes escape her gaze.

"It's a promise!"

"... Yeah."

Seeing Saya's broken smile, Mao clearly understood that Saya didn't plan on ever going back to Okinawa. She had already made her decision.

However, Mao wasn't about to let her stubborn streak lose to Saya's. She would press until the end, until she could pull Saya back home.

Mao kicked the door open and walked back through the hallway, only to turn and stomp across the living-room floor.

"About the coffee..."

"Shut it."

David seemed to be trying to start a serious conversation, but Mao cut him off, leaving him silent just as she stalked through the living room and into the kitchen.

She slammed the tray down onto the counter next to the sink. Then, she pulled the plane ticket to Okinawa out of her pocket and ripped it in two.

She didn't need it any longer.

Her feelings for Kai had made her follow Kai all the way here. This was what she wanted. But from now on it was about Saya—she would stay here for her friend.

Because that was what Mao wanted to do.

Mao threw the pieces of the plane ticket into the trash can and then realized that the coffee she had made for Saya still sat in the full cup.

She lifted the cup to her lips and drank half of it in one gulp.

“... That *is* bad.”

THE SUN HAD already touched down on the Ohio horizon.

The red-toned cloud looked a lot like the mushroom-shaped fallout from a bomb. There wasn't much to see outside of the guest room window, but the view of Lake Erie and the Canadian border was beautiful.

Wright-Patterson Air Force Base was one of only a handful of airfields that could accept Air Force One, and it was about as famous in its own right as Andrews Air Force Base—not because of the trivial urban legends of crashed UFOs, but because Dayton, Ohio, was where the Wright brothers had first lifted mankind into the birds' world of flight. The aviation museum adjacent to the air force base brought in visitors from all around the world.

The air force command center at Wright-Patterson should have been the most strictly managed area of the base, but on this day it had been liberated, to a degree.

The members of the base had been given a chance to relax, and for their families and neighbors, a carnival had been arranged, with the express permission of Secretary of Defense Grant.

"The results are better than expected."

Grant wasn't looking at the acrobatic biplane in the night sky, but at the large monitor on the wall, when he made his jubilant declaration.

On the screen were the Corpse Corps, which Anshel Goldsmith had just personally delivered.

The synthetic soldiers had brutally shredded the "mice," just as Grant had seen them do before, but this time he had been watching a live broadcast of their handiwork.

"It's been two hours since the manifestation of the Thorn." Secretary of State Brett, an African American woman in her fifties, looked at the time on the monitor's display as well as on her wristwatch. Now, the Corpse Corps were hunched over on the ground, and the areas of their skin that weren't covered by the helmets or uniforms were covered with red cracks.

"Right on schedule."

"Yes. Seeing the actual evidence of their disposal after usage makes them a very viable weapon."

"We will be able to give the president some good news."

Grant raised his hand, indicating to the officer standing there with the remote control that it was time to turn the monitor off.

Brett, who was sitting on the neighboring couch, crossed her legs. "All we need to do next is to train someone to command them. Is it true that Commander James Ironside is no longer a candidate?"

"Yes. I understand that there was an incident during maneuver exercises. Ironside looked up to Anshel Goldsmith, but otherwise, he was an excellent officer. It will be hard to find a replacement."

No one knew the Corpse Corps, the heart of the Delta Project,

as well as James Ironside had. The accident had occurred during drills at Christina Island in the UK, and Commander Ironside had been killed in action, along with several Corpse Corps. This was no minor loss.

"How did he and Anshel know each other?"

Brett shifted her small body on the couch as she asked the question, then went on. "I heard he was the son of one of Anshel's closest business partners. He was very talented, but the military goes by hierarchy—and contacts. He would have had trouble taking that post without Anshel's influence."

For a field officer that young to rise as fast as Ironside had was practically unheard of in the navy. It had been Anshel who had arranged for James to be positioned as the deputy commander of an aircraft carrier, which was then used to move some sort of container from Vietnam to France. It was obvious what Brett was thinking: What an extravagant demand, to use the world's strongest military as a personal shipping company!

"Commander Ironside's career history was that of an exemplary American and an exemplary American officer; nothing more, nothing less. I assume the State Department has the same information the military has received."

"It sounds the same. I haven't heard anything otherwise on him . . . Which reminds me—I hear the Dallas company didn't go so well." Grant had hoped Brett wouldn't bring that topic up. His outward demeanor remained calm, but inside he was swearing to himself.

"We can sell the implements of war, but we can't take care of one single man. Probably best to cut things off with them."

They had a long relationship with that company, and it was far easier to work with than Goldsmith. If they had been able to get rid of Anshel, Grant would happily have passed the Delta Project on to them, but obviously, plans had changed.

"Goldsmith hasn't made any moves?"

"Even though he was almost murdered, that guy acts as though nothing happened." That was the most eerie part of the whole thing. Anshel had taken no precautions—he hadn't even tried to look into the assassination attempt made on his life.

"Could it be that if he's worried that if he did change his behavior and hunker down, he would lose his company's stake in the world's largest market?"

Grant ignored Brett's question. "He has been supporting the Delta Project ever since Vietnam, but he doesn't look like he has aged a day since then. As a matter of fact, he actually seems to get younger to me."

The thought sent a chill down Grant's spine.

Anshel Goldsmith had been called a "merchant of death," but could he be one of those beings who truly had a control of death, who consumed the lives of others to stave off old age? He brushed the fantastic thought out of his mind.

"So the Delta Project is complete and the Corpse Corps are officially recognized . . ." The tone of Brett's voice hinted that she had strong feelings about the matter. Unlike Grant, who had been involved in the Delta Project from the military side, Brett had come in only when the project had reached a certain political plateau, so it wasn't hard to imagine that she saw it as completed.

"The demonstration we will stage later today is the last test before adoption, and at the same time it's an introduction to the American people."

"Don't forget the president's speech."

Brett was practically the president's right hand, and at times she even acted as his mouthpiece. Politicians worried about approval ratings and little else, and it was possible the Delta Project could be used to resuscitate the president's falling popularity. With international terrorism as it was, introducing a new enemy would inspire blind devotion to the country. Brett wanted to hurry up and promote the president's plan.

"Basically, yes, that's the idea. He's leaving the R & D up to them, but just in case, he wants to make sure for himself it is for real."

"Boss's request."

"It's an order."

"Got it."

Her overbearing tone was offensive, but following the orders of the head of state was the job of cabinet members.

"At any rate, the more cards in hand, the better."

"Yes—we are America, after all."

It was the only reason for Grant and Brett to set aside differences and come to an agreement.

After the sun had set, the outside temperature quickly dropped from sweltering to comfortable.

During the daylight hours, people stayed indoors to avoid the heat, venturing outside as it cooled down in the evening.

But even during the hot afternoon, there had been no shortage of aviation fans lofting up giant cameras to take pictures of the air show.

By now, the majestic fighter jets and the beautifully classic prop planes had landed, and the stage was readied for the main act. The base had been opened up to the public for the day, highlighting what a special occasion this was.

Young teen boys looked curiously at the giant poster.

"Diva . . . Is that someone famous?"

"Do you think if she was really famous she would come all the way out here?"

They weren't mistaken in identifying the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio, as the middle of nowhere. The locals had long since gotten used to the constant background noise of F-16s practicing touch-and-go maneuvers.

In Okinawa the base had been just as loud. Helicopters flew overhead, and Saya remembered the smell and having to raise her voice to be heard over the roar.

Diva's reputation was already known in the big cities, but she still was a new name, without even a debut performance. To the young kids in Ohio, her name surely meant little compared to LeBron James or Ken Griffey Jr.

"Forget that, this rules."

An overweight blond boy in a Cavaliers jersey stretched to its limits held a candy bar that was already mostly melted in his hand.

The other boys around him held similar bars. It was a new product from Cinq Flèches and long-legged pinup girls were



passing them out to passersby as they entered the arena near the temporary stage.

"They're more interested in candy bars than in Diva."

"That's what it seems."

"If they go in they'll get more."

Saya saw other free samples being given to the teens that entered the gate. And they weren't the only ones. The majority of people filing in seemed more interested in the freebies than the performance. There were no chairs, and the crowd was filling the standing area at a brisk pace.

Mao and Okamura were pretending to be regular people, invisible somewhere in the middle of the crowd.

Kai and David were watching the surrounding area closely, and Louis was on standby, awaiting orders in the van in the parking lot.

Saya and Hagi were a short distance from the performance area, waiting for the right opportunity.

". . . Riku." The name trickled from Saya's lips as she gazed at Diva's poster.

Her target wore the face of her dead brother. The discussion in the media about her androgynous features hadn't died down. When making her public appearances, she might have wanted to conceal or change her real appearance, but Saya honestly didn't care what her twin's reasoning was.

She could never forgive Diva for stealing her brother's face. Saya remembered Kai arguing with David in the parking lot earlier.

"Our duty is to support and protect Saya to the end."

"Are you saying if that bitch is right in front of us we aren't supposed to do anything?"

"I know you haven't forgotten that Saya is the only one with the power to permanently take down Diva. But in her present weakened state, it'll be a gamble."

"I know . . . I am not stupid!" Kai couldn't hide the emotion in his voice. "But, Diva's face . . . every time I see it, every time I hear her voice, I feel Riku . . . Riku crying inside me!"

Kai had grown up a lot. He no longer struck out haphazardly based on his emotions. But he could not suppress his hatred for Diva, Riku's killer. Kai's hatred for Diva was as deep as his love for his little brother. Saya understood this clearly. She felt exactly the same way.

Instead of Kai, she wanted to share that pain with Diva. To make her understand what it felt like to have someone taken from you.

Saya's leather bodysuit reflected the setting sun, and she turned toward the gate.

As she slipped into the crowd of visitors entering the performance area, suddenly her surroundings grew dim. Individual faces in the crowd surrounding her blended together into a massive fog.

She was already falling toward the ground when she realized her body had gone into spasms.

"Saya . . . !"

Hagi rushed up from behind her and caught her before she hit the ground.

"I think you need to lie—"

"I'm OK. Diva is here, so if I don't do something . . ."

Saya pulled herself up on Hagi's sleeve, and started walking again. She barely made it three steps before she got dizzy and had to lean over, both hands on her knees.

The soldiers doing ID checks at the entrance eyed her suspiciously. Perhaps they thought she was ill. The last thing Saya wanted was to draw attention to herself.

When Julia was still around, she had monitored Saya's condition and given her transfusions that had kept her in top shape. But now Saya didn't have her for support. There was no point in wanting to rely on someone who wasn't there.

Saya cursed her dizzy stagger and forced herself to stand up straight. Hagi scooped her up beneath her shoulders and knees just as she was about to fall backwards.

"... Hagi?"

The tall young man held her at his chest height while Saya tried to recover.

The people around them looked on curiously, but most were gawking only at the pretty, black-clad girl being carried by a tall and very attractive man. Physical contact was casual in American culture, and people probably saw them as excited lovers.

Ignoring the onlookers, Hagi quickly pressed through the crowd and found a little shade on a bench under a tree near the back where no one was around.

"Please rest until the time comes."

Saya lay on the empty bench, absorbing the cool feeling of the shade and the smell of nature. She closed her eyes.

"All right..."

Hagi kneeled in front of the bench and placed his right hand on her forehead. His twisted palm was cold like metal, and it seemed to absorb the fever that ran through her body.

"Your hand is cold, Hagi... It feels good."

By all rights, his monstrous claws and skin should have been repulsive, but they felt comforting on Saya's brow.

Inside the trailer covered with Cinq Flèches America promotions was a space that could have easily been mistaken for a high-class hotel suite.

Obviously the owner had the means to live in something nicer than a trailer home, and this was a leisure model intended only for those who could afford it. Every part of the interior had been ordered and installed specially, and this extravagant cruiser was second to none.

Professor Aston Collins rested comfortably on the horsehide sofa, and the scent from the leather filled his nostrils.

"It's a little late, but I'd like you to join me in celebrating my new position as the head of Cinq Flèches America . . ."

Van Argeno placed the bottle he held on the table and sat in a chair facing him.

He was obviously fishing for congratulations, but it didn't bother Collins. He and Van had a connection that couldn't be severed. Van had released him from the prison of being a Red Shield scientist, and looking back, he had been the perfect candidate to work on the Corpse Corps project.

He turned to Van. "With Solomon Goldsmith's sudden dismissal, Cinq Flèches America has seen a restructuring—and you've landed right at the top."

"Making you the top of the research branch." Van raised his glass. "The state of Ohio is the birthplace of the Rockefeller

Foundation and the home state of the master inventor Edison. Feels like a good omen for our work, wouldn't you say?"

"Cinq Flèches has the financial strength to wield fantastic power in this country, and as a scientist I am in a very enviable position . . . This is our path to the future."

"To our future."

"A bright future . . ."

The two exchanged grins as Collins raised his glass. The acidic sting of the Spanish champagne felt good trailing down his throat.

It was unofficially known that the US military was prepared to make an offer and officially adopt the use of the Corpse Corps. But that was just one step. Just as when the Corpse Corps had been lent to England, America would act as an agent to sell and place Corpse Corps in every country in the world. They would have a complete monopoly of the market, an immeasurably large advantage.

They would distribute the Chiropterans, the common enemy to mankind, and then furnish the Corpse Corps, the Chiropteran exterminators.

Cinq Flèches and Goldsmith would amass massive wealth, the US would consolidate its power, and the name Aston Collins would be etched into medical history as the mind behind discoveries as valuable as penicillin.

"How about it, Mademoiselle Silverstein?"

Van looked toward the door and held out the bottle of Cava.

Julia glared back at the young manager over her glasses. "I just need to speak with Professor Collins."

She walked into the room and handed a document to Collins, which he quickly began to scan. It was data concerning the Corpse Corps growth stimulation.

"Specifically, look at active sample number twenty-eight. It's splitting up faster than expected. I thought you should take a look."

"Hmm . . . I'll leave it in your hands. Just make sure you note it in the reports."

The Corpse Corps were weapons, but they were also living things. Occasional variations from the norm were to be expected. Compared with the prototype-grade Schiff, this was a miniscule aberration, and hardly merited too much concern.

". . . All right."

But Julia was obviously concerned about the trivial mutation. Her face showed disappointment and her white lab coat fluttered as she stiffened, just as it had as she first entered the room.

"Pardon me." Anshel appeared in the doorway.

Van jumped to his feet.

"If you want, I can show you the range of variations we have encountered in the past. What do you think, Sir Anshel?"

"No, thanks." Anshel, Van thought, was not nearly so smooth as the Cava. "The truth is, I want you to examine Diva as soon as possible."

Collins could see Julia's cheeks flush at the name.

It wasn't surprising. When Julia had been a member of Red Shield, Diva had been her sworn enemy above all others. Of course, scientists were beyond the influence of quaint notions of good and evil or the idea of opposing sides, and Collins had seen Julia performing perfectly in this new environment.

"Diva?"

Van's honest surprise had an air of haughtiness, but perhaps he wasn't aware of Diva's true nature. As far as he knew, she was an opera singer Anshel had taken a liking to and kept hidden away like a daughter, almost never allowing her to be seen in public. He might have known that her unique blood was the source of D67, but he didn't appear to have any interest in the history of the Chiropterans or Diva.

It was just as well. Some secrets were better shared only with trusted researchers.

Collins rose from the sofa, brimming with wounded pride. "A medical examination, as always, should fall under my duties . . ."

"Do you accept my request, Miss Julia Silverstein?" Anshel spoke like an English aristocrat to a subordinate, as Collins looked on in horror.

If he were more obvious it might look like he was trying to undermine Julia. Collins squeezed the report in his hands so tight wrinkles appeared.

"You want m-me . . . ?"

"I want you to become Diva's personal physician."

"You mean you are ta-taking away my responsibilities?" Collins's voice was shrill.

Until then, Anshel hadn't once peered in his direction, but now Collins had captured his full attention. Anshel's polite smile couldn't hide the frosty glare beneath it.

"Mr. Collins. You were originally hired to do research and development on the Corpse Corps, correct?"

". . . Yes."

Collins gritted his teeth in humiliation as he spat out the single-word answer. He had moved from Red Shield to Goldsmith to make the Delta Project a success. Following its completion, he had assumed that he would continue to oversee Corpse Corps production.

How was this turn of events even possible?

His knowledge, experience, and skill were at least equal to Julia's. She was nothing more than an assistant. And yet, she was being offered a more vital role.

Anshel's decision was a mistake.

However, there was no room for argument, and all Collins could do was quietly watch Anshel leave the room with Julia.

Ordinarily, Cinq Flèches personnel were essentially trusted to work freely on their projects.

Considering Collins's state of mind and the fact that he was still responsible for preparing Corpse Corps for shipping, Van made contact with the air force.

When it came to business, Van was a shrewd negotiator who pulled no punches. He was the one who had acquired the highest-end medical equipment for Diva's examinations, even though Anshel Goldsmith wasn't the type to pour gratitude onto a subordinate.

Julia had even more difficulty facing Anshel, and her eyes had been nailed to the monitor for quite some time.

She was looking at the image from the MRI being performed in the next room.

On the screen she could see two sleeping fetuses facing each other head-to-feet in embryonic fluid.



In Diva's womb . . .

The queen of the Chiropterans—was pregnant.

With twins.

"Amazing . . ." Anshel's black whiskers hid the shaking in his lips as he made his pronouncement.

"... Diva's . . . babies . . ." Julia wasn't even aware the words had left her mouth as she turned her gaze to the glass wall revealing Diva in the next room.

Diva was lying back inside a large piece of medical equipment, and from where Julia sat, she looked more like a young boy. However, it was clear that the abdomen on the monitor was that of a woman—and she was carrying two fetuses.

"Unlike the creation of 'mice' using drugs on humans, or the gene manipulation we used to create the Schiff, what we are seeing is evolution occurring naturally." Anshel's joyful tone seemed very much at odds with his usual stern demeanor.

Somehow Julia was able to force her frozen body to move enough to turn up from her chair and look at the man standing behind her.

It was a man whose motivations she couldn't fathom.

The Goldsmiths were related to the Goldschmidts, and Anshel seemed old enough to be Joel's uncle, so why had he gone against Red Shield and sheltered Diva? Why had he sacrificed so many lives for her, and for the sake of the Delta Project?

Did he care more about Chiropterans than he did about the human race?

Julia had accepted long ago that this was a question she herself couldn't answer. At the same time that she feared the Chiropterans, she couldn't help being fascinated by them. Now,

the shaking in her hands and feet was not only from fear, but also from excitement.

She said, "There is a passage in Joel's diary about Diva and Saya's mother. She was something like an insect queen, preserved from the time of the pyramids, and it wasn't known why the still-living twins rejected each other's blood as poison . . ."

Nor did they fully understand the source of Diva and Saya's incredible powers and their own positions as queens over others.

Perhaps Chiropterans were predisposed to twins to generate competition between the children. Birds of prey often fed the first-hatched babies first, rejecting the younger and weaker ones to ensure that the stronger ones would live to adulthood. The well-fed babies grew strong, and in the worst cases, their weaker siblings starved to death. And there were more extreme cases in nature, where, after the first babies were hatched, the mother would stop incubating the remaining eggs and let them sit and rot. Either way, the goal was to leave behind the strongest offspring.

Given the unparalleled vitality and lifespan of the Chiropterans, there wasn't much of an advantage in spreading a large number of descendents into society. If the balance between Chiropteran predators and their human prey were to be thrown off suddenly, members of the same family would find themselves competing for survival, leading to a high probability of eventual extinction.

If this special species could be kept to a precious few offspring, then it could live on safely. In order to assist with this order of

things, the Chevaliers had been created, born from the blood of the battling queens . . .

Or, on the opposite side, it was also conceivable that the twins' blood was poisonous to each other in order to prevent conflict.

Two children born from one mother's womb couldn't be considered too much competition.

The Chiropterans' long lifespans probably made it easier for them to anticipate their deaths. It was clear that Chiropterans were not immortal, from the evidence of the mummified body that carried Saya and Diva. The cause of her death was unknown, but it was clearly a violent one.

How she conceived and how long the gestation cycle was were also unknown, but considering the queens' thirty-year hibernation periods, birthing two children at one time might not have been enough to maintain the species.

The only two living queens were in conflict, and if their blood came in contact with each other, the strongest would not survive—rather, the species would be destroyed, just like that.

It was possible their blood was mutually deadly in order to avoid such a rivalry.

Yet, there was no definitive answer to that question.

"So, each would become pregnant, but not just to propagate the species, since they could always use humans to create Chevaliers?" Anshel's words matched Julia's thinking.

"That is what I was just—"

"*'Hypothesis on Chiropteran Breeding.'* A fascinating read."

It was a report she had written when she was still back with Red Shield. Collins must have given it to Anshel.

Anshel went on. "But a hypothesis is just that. A hypothesis. I have crashed into that same wall many times and come up with one conclusion."

"A conclusion?" Julia couldn't take her eyes off of his face. The head of Goldsmith Holdings, a man who could swing the world's economies one way or the other based on his decisions, was suddenly obscured behind this distressed researcher's eyes.

His gaze was focused on the two fetuses that showed up on the MRI screen.

"I have no hard evidence."

Belief based on something beyond logic. Julia knew he had gone through countless setbacks and hardships to get to where he was.

"The answer lies right in front of us: a queen of the Chiropterans, Diva, and the Chevalier born of the deadly blood of the other queen, Saya. These are their children."

"Diva and Riku . . . ?"

"Yes. Their daughters."

". . ."

As Julia understood it, Riku Miyagusuku had been exposed to Diva's blood in the attack on the Red Shield Headquarters and had died. Even now, she sometimes thought of that boy's kindness to strangers and his gentle smile. The truth was he should have never been mixed into this fight.

She suddenly saw Riku's face before her.

". . . ?!"

Julia's exclamation stuck in her throat, and her body moved backwards. The back of her chair creaked in response.

But those cold blue eyes and the crooked smile told her that the face she saw wasn't the real Riku's. Diva had put her face up close to the glass and was looking in at them from the next room.

"She does like to play pranks." Whether or not Anshel's comment made it to Diva's ears wasn't clear, but she quickly turned away and sat back down on the MRI table.

"That a Chiropteran queen can conceive babies . . . we had tested that theory who knows how many times . . ."

"Tested . . . ?" Julia became conscious of the sweat forming on her brow as her mind tried to make sense of Anshel's words.

"We tried mating her with humans, and then with her own Chevalier, but no pregnancy ever occurred."

This man's motives matched those of the very first Joel Goldschmidt: to unlock the secrets of unknown life forms and to illuminate hidden species. Diva had no doubt served as Anshel's experimental subject time and time again.

"But this time she coupled with the *other* queen's Chevalier, and it resulted in fertilization. In due time, she will give birth to two queens. Then they will make Chevaliers, and then more queens . . . Eventually, the world will be full of Chiropterans."

A chill traveled from Julia's shoulders down the length of her back.

"Does that scare you?" The teasing in Anshel's eyes was almost too much for Julia to bear. Anshel went on, "No, that's not it. This is what makes your researcher blood throb. To witness the moment an otherwise unknown life form begins to start a new era in the history of the world, taking over from the human race."

“...”

Julia cast her eyes down without saying a word.

The display on the MRI screen still showed the future queens. Julia tried to imagine what they would look like after they had left their mother's womb, and the emotion that bubbled to the surface of her skin was not fear.

Yes. Going against wisdom in order to fulfill her own curiosity, she tossed away her former team—everything. She had done so following her mentor's instructions, but there had been no coercion—the choice had been her own. Over the past year, she had continued to assist with Corpse Corps development for Goldsmith, completely under her own volition.

It wasn't a question of choosing between good and evil.

It was the chance to see a true Chiropteran with her own two eyes.

Saya was a human. Even if biologically she was a Chiropteran, inside her soul, she was human. And at Red Shield, Julia would never have come into contact with another Chiropteran.

On the other hand, Diva was pure Chiropteran. She had an animal-like appetite for killing and eating humans and occasionally a beloved Chevalier. She felt no need to justify or defend her behavior. Feelings, mood, chance . . . those were the factors that caused her to hurt others, take things for herself, and then lose interest just as quickly. And in the end, she felt no responsibility for her crimes.

“I still remember it now. The first time I laid eyes on a Chiropteran, I was so excited I could hardly speak . . .” She heard Anshel's voice and footsteps as he walked up behind her. “It was a very long time ago.”

She felt a frail hand rest on her shoulder and she raised her head in surprise.

Anshel was standing at an angle, and Julia saw his reflection in the glass. What she saw was not the well-built figure of an Englishman in his fifties, but the beautiful pale skin and short blond hair of a young woman from a cold and snowy land. It was the Chiropteran standing behind her who must have killed Elizaveta, the Red Shield operative from Russia. On the middle finger of his right hand was a silver ring just like the one the Chevalier who had mimicked Elizaveta had worn.

Julia's breath caught in her throat. "... Chevalier."

"That is correct." Anshel responded in Elizaveta's voice.

Julia felt not fear, but anger. Any remaining pride she had in her work with Red Shield seemed to sink to the bottom of her chest. She stared at Anshel sharply. "You didn't think I would harm Diva?"

Diva had been obedient during her medical examination. She had trusted Anshel when he told her to listen to everything her new doctor told her to do. Julia could have injected Saya's blood into the arm of the compliant Diva, killing her.

Anshel smiled with Elizaveta's face. "That's a foolish question. Of course you wouldn't hurt her. You are just like me—a seeker of the truth."

Unlike the rest of the base offices, which were closed to the public, the clinic was open and running.

Inside were not only soldiers and army doctors, but also a heatstroke victim on a stretcher. In another corner, a nurse wiped antiseptic solution on a young boy's scraped knee.

Louis and David spied Dr. Aston Collins walking through the passageway between two buildings and followed him.

The old researcher, formerly head of Red Shield's medical team and Joel's closest confidant, looked white as a sheet. He appeared to be completely unaware of anything around him, so tailing him would be easier than shadowing an elementary-school student.

He paused a moment in front of a door. A sign above it identified the room beyond as the MRI Scanning Room.

He stopped briefly as if to listen in on the conversation on the other side of the door as both hands balled into fists and his jaw visibly tightened, but before long he walked away like a cloud in a heavy breeze.

Either what Collins heard agitated him, or he was worried about something else. An interrogation could get answers, but this was enemy territory. Stupid mistakes could impede Saya's mission to destroy Diva.

David went outside and quickly found a window parallel to the door by which Collins had paused. Through a crack in the curtain, he could make out three figures in the examination room that adjoined the MRI.

David's eyes opened wide.

They were all people he recognized.

A woman in her late twenties wearing a white lab coat spun around in her chair.



"... Julia." Julia Silverstein had once been a Red Shield member and Saya's doctor. It had been just over a year since she had left the organization.

She had joined the Cinq Flèches research team in England, where David had borrowed a ballpoint pen from her. David's hand moved to his suit pocket, where that pen rested even now.

Beside Julia was a man David had seen the previous month, at Nathan Mahler's mansion.

Anshel Goldsmith's face was far from that of a monster which preyed on humans, and his eyes were gentle. He was looking at a small boy walking in from the scanning room.

David soon recognized that the little boy with the pretty face was actually a little girl.

"Diva . . . I knew you were here."

It wasn't a trap. The Chevaliers had brought her here for a different reason.

The muscles in David's arms tightened. His right hand quickly went to the holster under his jacket and he calmed his breathing. A Chiropteran's senses were as acute as a wild animal's. If they sensed him, all this effort would be wasted. He had to leave the attack up to Saya.

Without attracting attention, David watched Diva strip away the light-green hospital gown from her delicate body, and then put on a sailor top and culottes.

She shook her head lightly, ruffling her short bob haircut, and then turned to Julia as if waiting to hear something important.

"So?"

“... We have been able to confirm two embryos.” Julia’s answer made David shudder.

Embryos—Diva was pregnant...!

With more Chiropteran queens in the world, it wasn’t hard to imagine what fate would be in store for mankind.

Perhaps Diva had already known. She didn’t appear surprised.

“Say *babies*.” Diva glared at Julia disapprovingly. Julia cowered as Diva then placed both hands over her abdomen.

“When will my babies be born? Do you know?”

“Judging from their development, they would appear to be at the eighth week in a human pregnancy, but...”

But humans and Chiropterans were very different species. Human reproduction and gestation cycles might not match those of Chiropterans.

Like a father, Anshel wrapped his arm around Diva’s shoulder in support.

“Diva, this is only the beginning.”

“... I know.”

The irritation faded from her face, and soon Diva broke into a smile.

“They are going to be born really soon. I can feel it, because I am their mother.”

Her voluptuous smile evoked nothing but dread in David’s human brain. It was clear to him once again that Chiropterans and humans were natural enemies.

“We need to get headed to the stage,” Anshel gently chided.

“OK. But before that I want to ask one favor.” Diva’s sweet stare up at her Chevalier made his thin lips curve into a grin.

"What would that be?"

"Kai Miyagusuku . . . Do you think I could have him as my own?"

David was rattled for a second time.

Diva wanted Kai? Did that mean she wanted to kill him?

This battle had already taken a huge toll on Saya. Diva had plucked Riku from her, and George had also been killed. If Kai were to die, David was sure Saya would never forgive herself.

Anshel appeared to understand exactly what Diva had meant. He responded as if what she had asked was no more than the innocent request of a child. "Whatever you wish shall be yours."

The Chevalier placed his right hand over his heart and slowly bowed his head. Probably to get ready for the stage preparations, he led Diva out of the examination room, and David hesitated.

Should he follow Diva?

That was his first thought, but it was best not to underestimate the Chiropteran's abilities. The single wall between them was not a sufficient barrier from the Chiropterans' heightened senses, and if he got any closer, they might detect him.

And there was still Julia to worry about.

From the other side of the glass barrier he could see the way her shoulders hunched over, probably from fatigue.

She was now alone in the room. She almost looked close enough to reach out and touch, but for some reason, David's feet wouldn't move.

What would he say if he could talk to her? . . . She was no longer a part of his team. There were no words that would fit.

And yet, David couldn't bring himself to leave.



Diva's name might not yet have been widely known, but as a performer, she was clearly a very important person.

The performance hall was swarming with stagehands and staff, and the members of the Cleveland Orchestra were tuning their instruments, preparing to play. According to Okamura's sources, getting such a talented and internationally recognized orchestra to play an open-air concert for a relative unknown had taken the prodding of a big-time producer, Nathan Mahler.

Behind the metal framework of the stage were trailers lined up to be used as dressing rooms. With the ID card Louis had obtained for him clipped to his chest, Kai made his way backstage.

If the situation allowed, Kai hoped to get a glimpse of Diva before she went on stage. He wanted to let Saya know the moment Diva was separated from her Chevalier escorts.

Kai received a call on his cell phone. It was from Louis, who was waiting in the parking lot.

"How does it look?"

"The workers seems more busy. Showtime is coming up."

"Diva should be showing up soon. Be careful not to draw any attention to yourself."

"... Got it."

Kai hadn't forgotten David's warning.

The only person in the world who could bring Diva down was Saya. Kai couldn't allow his own impatience to jeopardize her opportunity to fulfill her mission.

He agreed with the notion in theory, even if his heart wasn't all the way there.

If Diva appeared before him right at this moment . . .

A coil of flame twisted in the pit of his stomach.

Louis must have sensed it, as the tone of his voice changed.

"Say, I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"Just sitting in the car listening to army chatter on the wireless is pretty boring. Could you pick me up one of those famous well-done army steak burgers?"

Kai sighed in frustration.

Outside, vendors were selling M65 field jackets, thick Gore-Tex wear, and other surplus for charity. There were also food carts serving base food, but this wasn't the time for Louis to be concerning himself with food.

"You'll just have to live with—" Just as Kai spoke, he felt the air behind him move.

"I see. The big brother wants to have a reunion with the blood of Riku Miyagusuku now flowing through Diva . . . Am I right?" The low baritone voice slid into his ear despite all the noise of the workers.

Kai spun around without hanging up his cell phone to see a tall man towering over him, looking down to meet Kai's eyes.

Where had he come from?

Behind him, the dusk sky was the muddied color of blood. The details of the man's face were hidden in shadow, but his intelligence was clear in the sparkle of his eyes, and his stare continued.

"Anshel . . . Goldsmith!"

"It's been a long time since we first met in Siberia, Kai Miyagusuku."

To gain a proper range for his pistol, Kai jumped backwards, but at the same moment Anshel grabbed Kai's right wrist with his left hand.

"Kai! Can you hear me? Hey—"

Anshel snatched the cell phone and quickly pressed the power button with his thumb, cutting off Louis's voice.

"Is this how you imagined your heroic fight to the death?"

"Urggh . . ."

With his free left hand Kai reached for the handle of the pistol at his back, but then he saw that the event staff carrying equipment out of a container were looking their way suspiciously.

Anshel gently slid the cell phone into Kai's shirt pocket.

"Diva has invited you to stand beside her."

The implausible words of a Chevalier.

But Kai did not resist.

He knew his opponents' intentions, but not the reasons, and he was curious. He could not contact Saya, but this might be a golden opportunity to kill Diva himself.

An opportunity to avenge Riku's death was worth any risk.

Kai let Anshel put an arm around his shoulder, and the two of them walked through the door of a large trailer still attached to a cab.

"This way."

After knocking on the door in the back of the trailer, Anshel indicated for Kai to go in.

Kai felt no fear as he grasped the doorknob.

His nostrils were filled with the smell of flowery perfume and cosmetics. A sofa was covered in gifts and flowers, and Kai realized this was the dressing room for the lead performer.

Anshel closed the door behind Kai. Diva must have ordered that she would be left alone with her gift.

Kai's eyes were drawn to the image of Riku's reflection in the mirror hanging on the wall.

"..."

Kai was speechless.

His plan had been to kill her as soon as he laid eyes on her. But the moment he saw her, his chest went numb and it was hard to breathe.

That face was attached to a child-like body sitting in the chair facing the mirror, and Diva carefully pushed aside her bangs with an innocent gesture.

Yes, she was wearing Riku's face.

Diva's fingers played with her hair, apparently unaware of her visitor. She ran a hand through her bangs and then blew her cheeks out with a mouthful of air.

Her blue eyes moved and met his in the mirror.

Her eyes narrowed as her cheeks lifted in a chilly smile, and Kai was then sure he was not looking at Riku.

Diva spun her chair around and spoke to him in a cold tone. "I wanted to see you."

"... Me?" It took him a few moments to answer because her voice was also Riku's.

Kai wrinkled his brow, silently reprimanding himself for feeling so emotional about hearing his brother's voice again.

"You don't look very happy."

"You killed Riku." Saying it made it real. She may have looked like Riku, but she was the hated enemy.

"Hee hee." Diva took in his glare as if it were a warm spring breeze and laughed.

"But, you know, Riku is alive inside me. See . . ."

Diva stood up, walked toward him, and nuzzled her slender body up to his. Her white hand pulled his right palm to her abdomen.

"There are babies inside here. They are Riku's and my children."

". . ."

Kai lost his voice. He could only stare at the face of his brother.

Diva was pregnant. With Riku's babies.

With all his might, Kai could not fully comprehend what that meant. He didn't understand the timing or her intention.

Before Kai could wrap his head around the situation, a tall, blond-haired man came flying in through the door to the dressing room.

"Heey, Diva! It's almost time!"

The man walked past Kai and put his hands on Diva's shoulders, pressing her down once again into the chair in front of the mirror.

"Nathan! I told you to knock before you come in here."

The man ignored her complaints and took a close look at the hairstyle and makeup of the costumed Diva.

"Looking very nice. You are going to look amazing up on that stage."





This must have been the show's producer, Nathan Mahler. He was the Chevalier who had appeared with James Ironside at the London opera house.

Diva took a last look at her costume and then stood up and faced Kai. "I will be singing for you."

". . . Don't bother." Kai turned away from her innocent-looking smile, trying to forget about the babies inside her.

"No, it's what I want to do." The almost-sorrowful tone of her voice hung in the room as she walked out the door.

"Well, you're coming too, aren't you?" Nathan's hand landed on Kai's shoulder.

The soft and feminine tone of his voice didn't match the strength Kai felt resonate from the palm of Nathan's hand, telling Kai that he didn't really have a choice.

It had been nearly thirty minutes since the orchestra had completed its opening performance.

The stage, tinted by the evening darkness, was suddenly flushed with light. The lights came from every direction but pointed to one spot on the stage where a girl stood alone.

There was a blue rose on the center of her chest, and her eyes seemed to sparkle, gem-like, with the same color.

The audience members had been chatting while trying free samples of Cinq Flèches snacks.

There was no musical accompaniment to signify the start, and it took the audience by complete surprise. It only took them a moment to be completely silenced as they anticipated

the first notes from the songstress's mouth.

Diva calmly looked across the entire audience and then parted her lips.

Those thinking it would be a modest opener for this newcomer were betrayed by their expectations. What came from Diva's throat were not words, but a beautiful sound. It seemed to take hold of each audience member in turn as they stared at her, mouths open.

Van watched the scene from the surveillance-camera feeds.

The American researcher standing before the equipment turned to him.

"Van."

It appeared the time had come.

"I know. The party is about to start."

The Corpse Corps had just taken off and were awaiting orders in the air. The cavalry was ready. All that was left was to wait for the Indians to attack. This was the first party hosted by Cinq Flèches America. It was important for the dignified guests to have an enjoyable—and memorable—time.

Van turned to the two cabinet ministers sitting in the borrowed control room at the base and forced a smile.

"It's just about time. I am sure you will be thrilled by what I have to show you."

"That's what we're counting on."

Secretary of Defense Grant's response was curt. As always, that military style of communicating irked Van. It reminded Van of Commander James Ironside, who had gone missing in an accident. To Van, doing business with people like this was

incredibly tedious, but as the CEO of Cinq Flèches Group, it was his responsibility.

The Corpse Corps were on the verge of being accepted by the American armed forces, and to help ensure that this final show went without a hitch, Van had to try to keep the Americans in a positive mood.

"I am just asking to double-check, but you don't have any friends or family at the performance tonight, do you?"

"No need to worry. Do your job as you like."

"Just make us happy." Secretary of State Brett added the last line.

Van chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. He pulled an orange-and-cream candy from his breast pocket and popped the brightly colored sphere into his mouth.

"Well then, without further ado, let's get started. The more American patriots there are, the better. It's because our demonstration requires complete sacrifice of the soul."

The monitor showed the audience, much of which would not leave the performance area alive.

These people willing to become test cases for the benefit of their country were true patriots. It was regrettable they didn't know it yet, and that even after they died the White House wouldn't be able to acknowledge them.

*God bless America . . .*

The sound of the door opening caused Julia's heart to race.

The ash from her menthol cigarette fell to the ground.

"A doctor who's caring for expecting mothers is not supposed to smoke." Collins shut the door behind him and grinned.

Julia didn't want to see his smiling face and spun her chair so her back was facing him. She placed the cigarette in an ashtray on her desk.

"What is it?"

"Since Diva is now your patient, I want to hear what your plan is."

". . . To learn all there is to know about Chiropterans. That is all."

Julia answered him as she continued typing her report on Diva's MRI on her open laptop computer.

However, the sense of someone staring at her back ruined her concentration.

"Hmm? And you are going to reveal the discovery of the century to the public?"

"Correct."

"And what do you think the duty of the scientist is?"

"Isn't it to discover the truth?"

Julia was aware of her emotionless tone as she spoke. This conversation with Collins was agonizing.

No matter how hard one tried, there was no definite truth. There were as many truths as there were people on the earth. That's why scientists used scientific methodology and made great efforts to stay within certain restrictions. One didn't decide what was the right circumstances, but groped for the *viewpoint* one was looking for. When that is shared with another person, it becomes a stronger truth.

Julia herself felt naive in this area, and was self-conscious of how arrogant she must have sounded.

Collins said, "Truth is something that everyone recognizes as true. It is dangerous for only one person to hold the truth. After finding out about the Chiropterans, I thought about what I could learn to help humanity and my duty to inform the world of what I knew."

His attitude was probably correct.

If the mission of science was to benefit the human race, then not sharing potentially significant discoveries could be seen as a crime.

However, Julia couldn't help but retort, "Even before garnering honor and praise?"

Julia had been questioning how pure Collins's scientific pursuit of the truth was for a while.

She owed him a great debt of gratitude, and so she had never put her feelings into words, but ever since leaving Red Shield, Collins had clearly been veering away from the fundamental goal.

"What is wrong with wanting that? Scientists have always been proud to have their names attached to their discoveries to go down in history."

Julia just realized that Collins's voice was now coming from behind her.

Julia quickly turned around.

"Chiropterans are dangerous! It's not too late to undo this!"

She was speaking not as a researcher, but as a member of Red Shield.

It was a feeling that had been lurking in the depths of her heart for this last year. She had been content in selling her soul to do

Chiropteran research, but with her happiness had also come a fear she had spent more and more energy on trying to ignore.

The more she knew about the Chiropterans, the more she felt that they were superior to humans in every way. And Diva's blood could be used to create massive amounts of Chiropterans. The human genetic code was completely remapped by the miraculous Base D.

That same Base D caused humans to turn into either the unintelligent and inferior lower Chiropteran, or else into the high-grade, intelligent, and powerful Chevaliers . . . There were still many mysteries about their makeup. It was breaking down these mysteries one by one that made Julia both excited and uneasy.

Collins likely saw the Chiropterans' threat as limited to their muscle and bones. He was so focused on the pseudo-Chevalier Corpse Corps that he still couldn't see how terrible the Chiropterans were.

"Undo it?" Collins's face bent into a curious expression. "After the destruction of Red Shield, where would we go?"

Collins began to chuckle. His uncontrolled laughter hit the ceiling and rained back down. Julia grasped the hem of her lab coat tightly.

It was already too late.

Just as Anshel had predicted, she would carefully observe the growth of Diva's embryos with a scientific fascination. Being able to view something no one had ever seen before in the history of time made a certain pride swell in Julia's chest.

If she could avoid making judgments on the morality of it, her scientific instincts would lead her down any path that allowed her to continue research.

It was those instincts that had allowed Julia to turn her back on Red Shield and had brought her here.

On the other hand, there was her instinct to inform the human race of the dangerous Chiropterans. As a member of Red Shield, maybe she should have fought until the end . . . but even if she changed her mind now, there was nothing to return to.

"Julia, can you hear it?" Collins spoke in a hushed voice.

Diva must have already gotten on stage. Her incredible voice painted the night in beautiful colors.

The queen of the monsters that fed on humans had a singing voice that completely captured people's attention. It seemed incredible that one individual could embody both extremes at the same time.

"My Diva has begun her song."

Julia saw him pull something from his jacket that made her tremble in horror.

Collins held the automatic pistol straight out in front of him.

"Professor . . ."

"They chose you over me. It's like I am out of the picture." Collins clicked off the safety with his thumb.

Julia fell backwards out of her chair. Her lower back hit the desk, knocking her laptop to the floor.

Julia feared the precious data she had stored in the computer was at risk, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from Collins.

"Obviously you are a superior candidate. So excellent, in fact, that you see far beyond my vision, and my view has been cut off . . . Is that right?"

"No, I . . ." More than his weapon, Julia cowered at the true motives her mentor was revealing.



Julia still remembered the very first lecture of Collins's she had listened to in college. Many students had struggled through his class, hoping not to work at pharmaceutical companies or cosmetics makers when they graduated, but in his laboratory.

Her reports had always come back covered in red marks. The fact that he had taken the time to pore over her papers cover to cover, writing relevant comments, had been really inspiring.

He had been strict, but it had only made receiving her doctorate degree that much more valuable to her.

How despondent must he have been when he had been forced to leave the university, all ties severed?

She followed him to Red Shield with no hesitation.

Then, under Joel's protection, they had spent many fruitful days working together—and until now, she had always watched his back.

"From the beginning, you were nothing more than a pet dog to me."

Julia realized that she probably should have sensed that, as well.

But as his apprentice, she hadn't trusted her own abilities or results, so she had put all her faith in him.

Collins went on. "If you were to disappear, then I would become indispensable. As my student, I make this final request to you."

Julia shook her head. ". . . If you killed me, I can't imagine they would trust you."

"Don't say that!" Collins's raised voice did not make Julia flinch, and she continued quickly.

"They may be shortsighted, but they're far from stupid . . ."

"Shut up!"

Collins followed the guttural shout by starting to squeeze down on the trigger of the pistol.

Right then, the door to the room opened.

Collins quickly spun around, but then turned back to Julia in confusion.

Julia used the moment to throw herself to the side, but she could see the flash from the muzzle of the pistol pointed at her chest.

Julia threw both hands in front of her face and shut her eyes before she heard something heavy hit the floor. She looked up cautiously.

Collins was screaming.

He was stumbling down the hallway, and from the palm of his right hand stuck out the grip of a lock-blade knife. The gun had fallen onto the floor.

As he fled the room, Collins took no notice of Julia.

In front of her she saw the backside of a man she recognized, standing between Collins and the fallen pistol, his eternally tense body covered by a black suit.

David turned around to face her.

"You all right?" His typically gruff query betrayed no emotion.

"David . . . What are you doing here . . . ?" Julia's tone was purposely forceful to hide her trembling. She heard the sound of something dripping onto the ground.

There was a pool of red around David's feet.

His legs fell out from under him.

Julia rushed to catch him as he sank to his knees, but she was little help. His tall, muscular body hit the floor and she struggled to roll him onto his back. David had a high threshold for pain,

and for an injury to drain the strength from his legs like this, it would have to be very serious.

Julia saw the growing red stain on his shirt over his abdomen and her breath was stuck in her throat. "Wha . . . why . . . ?"

"Thanks for the loan." David's forehead was sweating heavily, and he was clearly in pain. Julia looked at what he held out to her and was rendered speechless.

A ballpoint pen.

He must have been carrying it since he snuck into the laboratory in England. It was just a disposable pen, but he had kept it all this time.

"You are really something . . ." Julia almost laughed as her shaking hand took the pen from his.

Feeling the fresh blood on the pen brought Julia back to the present. If she didn't stop the bleeding soon, David would die.

Julia tried to stand up, but David pulled her back down.

" . . . Don't go."

David gripped her wrist firmly with his right hand.

"You are going home with me."

"David . . ." No other words would come out.

Red Shield was no longer her home. Julia didn't know if they would accept her, if they would forgive her.

"Everybody's waiting."

David smiled.

They had fought together for many years, but this was the first time she had ever seen him smile.

The moment she saw that awkward expression, one thing became very clear to Julia.

There was still something worth going back to at Red Shield.  
*I want to go back.*

The fingers around her wrist slipped and fell to the floor.  
Julia cried out weakly, "David . . . !"

The thunderous applause was testimony to Diva's success.

Even after Diva had left the stage, the audience members continued to clap and cheer. The members of the media sent to a remote area of Ohio to cover a mysterious new singer realized the trip hadn't been a waste of time.

Diva finished her performance as she started it, without addressing the audience as she walked to the back edge of the darkened stage.

"How was I?"

"Perfect!"

Diva's question, however, had not been directed at Nathan, who punctuated his enthusiastic answer with a raised thumb.

Diva seemed to have forgotten about the audience calling for an encore and looked instead at the young man with his shoulder clasped by Nathan's other hand. Kai.

". . . Who cares?" Kai turned his head away to hide his true feelings.

Kai had found her singing to be incredibly beautiful. He didn't want to admit to it, and it was more humiliating to allow her to read his mind.

"I guess it doesn't make you want to stay."

"Diva."

Anshel's smile hid a warning, and Diva tilted her head forward disappointedly.

"We've been waiting so long for this! It was supposed to be special."

Kai thought about what that last sentence could mean.

For starters, he couldn't understand why she chose to sing for an audience. She had changed her appearance, and it was probably specifically to protect Diva that her Chevaliers consented to exposing her talents to the world. It wasn't only Saya and Red Shield. The Schiff were targeting her, as well. Considering the recent assassination attempt on Anshel, it was clear that even in America there were enemies to contend with.

And now Diva was a recognized singer.

Maybe that "special day" signified a goal Diva and her Chevaliers were trying to meet.

"Kai."

He saw a secret hidden in her eyes as she looked at him.

"I want you by my side on that special day. That's why—"

Kai took in her sweet aroma as she suddenly appeared very close to him.

"—I want you to become my Chevalier."

Kai was completely flabbergasted. He gasped and choked on his own saliva. He didn't try to protest or cross-examine her.

Eyes wide, he stared at Diva, who calmly returned his gaze.

"Along with Anshel and Nathan, I want you to help protect my babies."

". . . Who? Me?" Help the one that killed Riku? It was unthinkable, even as a cruel joke.

Her next words made Kai grit his teeth in shame.

"If you become my Chevalier, then you can make children with Saya-neesama."

"..."

There was no response to a statement like that. Kai could only continue to keep his eyes with hers.

Saya was his *sister*. There was nothing beyond that. Kai loved her, but that was as family.

But then why couldn't he bring himself to laugh at Diva's words . . . ?

"I can see it in your eyes. You want to, don't you?"

Diva's teasing smile birthed an unpleasant feeling in Kai's heart. How could Riku have been with someone like this?

"This isn't a goddamn joke! Who'd want to be your slave?"

Nathan briskly removed his hand from Kai's shoulder.

Kai sprang into motion, grabbing the handle of his pistol. In the next moment, he had the muzzle pointed right at the center of Diva's forehead.

". . . Go ahead. Shoot me."

Diva did not try to move out of the way.

In his one moment of hesitation she pulled the gun down with her right hand.

She had much more strength than her skinny arm let on, and soon the muzzle was forcibly pointed at her heart.

"If you hate me so much, then shoot."

With her left hand Diva pushed back the slide, loading a bullet into the chamber. Then, with her thumb, she pushed back the hammer.

"Pull the trigger. Then drink my blood. Do that, and you can be with me forever . . . C'mon, *Kai-niichan*."

For just one brief second the laughing girl looked and sounded exactly like Riku.

A pain swelled in Kai's heart.

Riku was gone. But inside Diva's belly were Riku's children.

Maybe someday he would be able to hold those babies . . . but the mother was Riku's murderer.

Hatred forced his fingers to squeeze tighter.

One more centimeter.

He could be released from this agony. Kai didn't know what would happen after that, but at least this weight could be lifted off his shoulders.

On the other hand, if he became a Chevalier, he might have a better shot at killing Diva. He didn't intend to become Anshel and Nathan's lapdog, but it wouldn't be bad to have the power of a Chiropteran. Then Kai could protect Saya in the same way Hagi did.

But even if he were able to do that—

Several seconds went by.

The strength drained from Kai's shoulders and he pulled his index finger away from the trigger.

Next it was Diva's face that tightened up.

Kai clearly let out a deep exhale.

". . . Sorry, but I'm not gonna be your bitch. I know Riku would want me to stay just the way I am."

Kai wasn't trying to insult Riku and Hagi, who had been transformed by accident, really, before devoting their energy to

Saya. However, Kai didn't want to erase who he was now to gain more power.

Even without that power, hadn't George been able to raise Saya perfectly while protecting her at the same time?

"... I don't like it!" Diva squinched her face into a dissatisfied expression.

"Maybe I'll just eat you, instead..." She laughed like an adult threatening a child, but she then seemed to notice something, just as her body flew backwards.

The sudden blast of air caused Kai to cover his eyes with his arm.

When he opened his eyelids he saw a silvery blade pass before him.

The sword that passed through the space that Diva's head had occupied only a moment earlier was wielded by none other than Saya.

Her hair and half-cut riding jacket fluttered in the wind that had followed her through the hole in the roof of the trailer.

One minute before, the concert stage had been a different place.

Bathed in a feverish applause, Diva had left the stage just before it had happened.

Mao had just happened to see the group of three boys in the back, one of whom had dropped the candy bar he had been eating onto the ground.

He had stayed doubled over for a while, but Mao hadn't thought much of it. She had guessed the large crowd and confusion might have caused him to feel ill.



But when the overweight boy's back split open and the liver-colored skin swelled through, Mao reassessed her opinion.

"Chiropterans . . . ?!"

What arose was larger than an adult man, and in his right hand was not a candy bar, but the neck of his dazed friend as the newly born Chiropteran bit off the top half of his face.

The brain and its stem slipped out of what remained of the skull.

At the same time surrounding concertgoers had panicked as they realized that a monster was eating the convulsing body of the dead boy. Frantic shrieks had echoed out from different areas of the audience.

At least five or six Chiropterans had appeared within the crowd of several hundred people.

"This is messed up . . ."

Okamura had advanced, camera in hand to record the events, with Mao following behind him.

The audience members had rushed in confusion toward the entrance gate. Mao and Okamura had been near the rear of the outdoor arena, so they hadn't needed to worry about being crushed, but on the other hand, they were unable to escape.

The gun-toting guards near the gate seemed to be waiting for orders, but under the crush of the crowd, there was nothing they could have done.

"This is so messed up! You have to think of a way outta here!"

As Mao hurled abuse at Okamura, she tossed away the instant ramens and freeze-dried meals she had collected. She needed to keep her hands free to defend herself.

"Cinq Flèches has cup ramen now? . . . We should let Louis know."

"Forget the ramen!"

"It would help if those freaks could be as satisfied eating instant noodles."

As he put his cell phone up to his ear, Okamura's face grew tense. As people scrambled about, the Chiropterans grabbed them randomly, sometimes tearing them apart in pairs, and the floor of the small arena was soon covered in blood and viscera. The eyes of the monsters shone with an eerie red light that seemed to flash here and there on the grounds.

Louis must have answered the phone. Okamura passionately began to explain the situation. "We got Chiropterans here! Saya? She headed for Diva. It's just us two civvies on our own. What should we . . . David did *what*?"

Okamura's face went pale.

"Hurt? . . . By a Chiropteran?"

"Hey, what happened to David?"

"I don't know for sure, but it sounds like someone named Collins shot him. They're going to take him to the hospital."

Louis must have been in panic mode, too. The phone call apparently ended there.

David was a serious concern, but right now, they were in a very volatile situation. This journalist needed to worry less about the story and more about their safety.

"Do something! Get us out of—"

Mao was scanning the area for an escape route when her field of vision suddenly went black.

She turned around to see a large shadow obstructing the light.  
“Y-you . . . !”

The cup ramen she had tossed had bounced off the blood-covered face of a Chiropteran.

The ramen was no more concern to the monster than a fly’s buzzing. Only minutes earlier he had been a normal American, but now all he was focused on was the blood of the young person before him.

“Don’t be stupid! Run!” Mao heard Okamura’s cry, but her body wouldn’t respond.

It wasn’t the first time Mao had seen a real, live Chiropteran, but she had never been this close to one before. And this one was about to kill her.

She was terrified. She knew she needed to escape, but her feet wouldn’t move.

Mao squashed the impulse to scream, and stared the monster in the eyes.

No matter what happened, Mao Jahana was friends with Kai Miyagusuku and Saya Otonashi, and she was a member of Red Shield. She would not show weakness.

“What do you want? I was born in Okinawa, the land of Japan’s worst students and meanest gangsters! You wanna kill me? Then let’s see what you got!”

She passed the instant curry from her left hand to her right, spilling a bit on the way.

It was doubtful he understood Japanese, but the Chiropteran bared his fangs. He leaned down, towering over Mao, and, in a daze, she threw the curry, stew, and vacuum-packed sausages she held at him.

It was at that moment a silvery flash cut through the air.

The giant arm that was about to smash down on Mao fell straight to the ground.

Mao felt the splash of hot blood hit her in the face, and watched bewildered as the forearm of the monster, cut off at the elbow, rolled across the ground.

"Humans are weak, so don't be stupid."

A pint-sized girl with purple and red hair stood before the creature several times her size as she looked over her shoulder to chide Mao.

Even though it was nearly summer, she wore a sort of monk's robe with the hood pulled up over her head. She carried a battle-ax that was bigger than she was, which she had just used to slice off the monster's arm.

"Are you . . . Schiff . . . ?"

"Yeah. Lulu."

It seemed like she was happy someone remembered her, and she flashed a big white smile before suddenly vanishing before Mao's eyes.

The Chiropteran hardly seemed to notice his missing forearm and swung his stunted elbow through the place where the Schiff had just stood. The concrete split open, and Mao turned her face away from the dust and flying fragments.

Lulu was flying through the air.

As her small frame rose higher in the sky, she flipped herself around, and the full length of her ax reflected the light.

Head, shoulders, elbows, torso, thighs, knees, feet—the creature's body fell to pieces like a tower of building blocks.

The hunks of meat and bone crashed on the ground around Mao's feet, and the blood the Chiropteran had taken from people now spread in growing pools.

In a panicked daze, Mao stepped back before the blood reached her sandals and spun around to a voice coming from behind her.

"You two had better hide."

She saw the profile of an elegant young man. It was the Schiff leader, Moses.

He followed the Chiropterans through the crowd of humans like the wind.

In his hand was a scythe.

The heads of monsters were lopped off one by one by his rounded blade, and their bodies fell to the ground.

As Lulu and Moses fought the enemies on one side, in the other direction, a tall young man in glasses wielding a long trident sliced through Chiropteran necks.

As he skewered a monster through the chest, Mao realized this must have been Carmen.

"We followed Diva's scent, only to find these small fries." Carmen took out his disappointment on his enemies. The frame of the large Chiropteran flew into the air and its path formed a perfect arc before it slammed back into the concrete.

Its spine was crushed and its head cracked open like a melon.

Carmen cut the still-living creature's head from its body, and then abruptly switched his grip to an underhand hold to pierce the head and flick it behind him.

The Chiropteran, whose neck was cut clean from the throat to the spine, spat blood from its open mouth.

Moses had another pinned down, and with his sickle he separated all four of its limbs before liberating its head from its body.

Carmen watched the scene and again speared the head with his pike and flung it away before turning to assist Lulu.

"Hyaa!" Lulu sliced the enemy just before her from its head through the nether regions, and her ax swung her back around as she did a somersault in the air. Another monster that had closed in from behind her was welcomed with a kick in the chin.

Broken fangs flew, and as the Chiropteran's head snapped back, Carmen pierced it through the heart from behind, then, in one bold stroke, cut up straight through its skull.

Moses held the handle of his scythe horizontally and rammed the blade into a Chiropteran abdomen. There was a nasty crunch as the monster's ribs were pulverized and the large creature was tossed backwards.

At the exact same time, a Chiropteran that had avoided the jab of Carmen's spear wasn't so deft at avoiding his kick, and flew back the way it had come.

The two monsters, careening from different directions, crashed into each other in midair, tearing flesh and breaking bones.

Lulu was already in the air, and as she bore down on the two of them, her battle-ax flashed in her hands. Her blade blasted through both of their repulsive bodies, lopping off their heads and sending a shower of blood into the night sky like a blooming flower.

"Wow . . ."

The Schiff worked together perfectly, but they didn't even look at each other or say anything. What one should do and what the others were going to do—it was all completely clear to

them. Mao finally had the chance to see the Schiff show off their connectedness in battle firsthand.

The blood-soaked massacre looked like a kind of synchronized dance.

Thanks to the swift work of the Schiff, the presence of the unwelcome guests had been almost completely erased from the performance area.

"So they came here, too." Unable to not work, Okamura peered over the viewfinder to confirm that the battle was over before pointing his camera down and wiping the sweat from his face.

"Now that I think about it, we haven't heard from them since we were separated on Christina Island."

That must have been six months before. The Schiff had no nationality, and therefore no passports. Coming to the U.S. couldn't have been as easy as sneaking through the Chunnel from France to England.

If they had asked Joel, surely he would have done something to help, but they didn't seem like the type to request favors from humans. They must have found their way to this base by means of their own power and ingenuity. They had probably heard about the concert from TV or the radio; since the surprise news of Diva's concert had come out several days earlier, there had been much buzz in the media.

"What's that sound? . . . Coming from up there?"

"A plane?"

Following Okamura's gaze, Mao looked up.

The sky was the color of ink, except for a bright red light moving across it. It wasn't moving very fast, and Mao could

distinctly hear the sound of four propellers chopping through the air. It wasn't a jet, at least.

"This better not be like the time they bombed the nature conservatory."

Okamura's words sounded like a bad omen as he peered through his camera's lens.

However, the plane continued steadily upward without incident. The sound of the plane faded as it got further away.

However, Okamura kept watching, and after a few moments groaned suspiciously. "A parachute. They dropped something."

"Give me that."

"Hey! Watch it! You trying to choke me to death?"

Mao ignored Okamura's complaint as the camera strap pulled around his throat when she brought the viewfinder to her eye and looked almost straight up.

She imitated Okamura's stance, but she could see almost nothing through the finder. She looked again, struggling to adjust the magnification.

*Got it! There it is.*

It looked like the whitish cap of a mushroom, many mushrooms, floating in the night. They looked as if they were simply drifting leisurely in the air, but the truth was they were probably dropping at a high speed.

The shapes grew in size until they suddenly disappeared from her field of vision. They were too close to see at this magnification.

"Where did . . . !"

Just as Mao lost sight of them in the finder, she put the camera down and clearly saw them falling with her naked eye.



She looked across the horizon to see white sheets blowing across the sky in the wind. She realized that these were the giant parachutes and tried to follow them with her eyes for as long as she could before she was forced to squint from the dust and sand stirred up in the wind.

All the parachutists that landed in and around the performance area looked the same.

The paratroopers didn't roll across the ground to break their landing. They didn't appear to feel the effects of falling from the equivalent of a second-story window—the height at which they had released themselves from their parachutes and then landed on their two legs with nothing to slow them down. Ordinary men would have broken their legs at the knees.

That wasn't all that was strange about them. They each carried a medieval-looking blade, and the moment they hit ground, some of them were already swinging their swords without pausing to recover.

It was the group engineered to replace the Schiff. Seeing their efficient movements reminded Mao she had seen these soldiers before.

"They are the ones who followed us to Grey's house!"

They were the synthetic Chevaliers known as the Corpse Corps.

Right then, the speakers of the outdoor concert hall, which had lost power after Diva's exit, suddenly crackled to life.

"—American citizens in attendance of this event. Do not panic."

The voice had a French accent and was a little too condescending.

different weapon that matched the individual. That was why they were able to work off of each other so effectively, with such a wide range of attacks. Their true strength was in how seamlessly they intertwined with each other's actions.

The Corpse Corps technique had its own beauty in its efficiency, but it lacked the artistry and grace that made you forget that what you were watching was a massacre.

But the most important difference wasn't in the aesthetics of their aggression, but in their ultimate fates.

"Moses, it's *them!*"

Carmen's shout dripped hatred as he looked up from the Chiropteran he was feeding from and spotted the Corpse Corps.

"Let's do this!"

Lulu lowered a still-beating Chiropteran heart from her mouth and squeezed it until it burst as she raised her ax with the other hand.

But Moses shook his head. "Now is not the time to fight them. Our target is Diva."

"But . . ."

"If she escapes us tonight, there is no guessing when we will have another chance to find her. Think about our priorities." Moses's roar forced even the impatient Carmen to back down.

They were targeting Diva to satisfy the most primitive of desires. They wanted to keep living.

". . . All right. We will kill her before Saya gets the chance!" Carmen slammed the butt of his pike into the concrete.

Lulu licked the blood from around her lips. "Revenge for our brothers and sisters!"

"Uh, excuse me . . ." Mao tried to interject, but the three had already shimmered away and disappeared like heat waves off a highway.

"Thank you for helping us!" Mao cried out, hoping they could still hear her.

As she drew her katana, Saya glared into Diva's crimson eyes. She quickly covered the ten-meter distance to the back side of the trailer.

"It's true. He really is a beloved prince for Neesama."

Ignoring the two nearby Chevaliers, Diva began to laugh.

So that was what she had meant when she said she had an interest in Kai. Like Riku, Kai was more important to Saya than life itself. Clearly Diva wanted to take him from her.

"I won't give Kai back to you."

Saya repositioned her sword in front of her.

Her body still felt heavy, and her legs were shaky. But this was not the time to think about her exhaustion.

Diva could not be allowed to have her way with Kai. Saya would kill Diva here.

Saya lowered her hips and immediately jumped forward, horizontal to the ground's surface. In the blink of an eye, she cleared the distance between her and Diva with her bare sword poised to strike.

However, her opponent's image disappeared like a mirage and her sword sliced through empty air.

Saya had expected as much and quickly leapt away from that spot.

Diva had landed on the roof of the trailer, and in no time at all, Saya had jumped up behind her, swinging her blade at Diva's back.

Again, the blade touched not a hair on Diva's head.

Like a lover running just out of her partner's grasp, Diva wore a teasing grin on her lips as she jumped back to the ground.

"Hyaa!"

Without a moment's delay, Saya leapt down toward Diva's head, dropping the blade at the speed of sound, and saw Diva standing strangely still, just as her head was about to be split open.

Her arm shot back painfully from the recoil.

Anshel had caught her left wrist in one hand, preventing her killing blow.

It would have been so much easier without Diva's head Chevalier there . . .

But Saya was a different person than she had been when she had fought Anshel in Russia. Her fierce battles with Schiff and Chevaliers had been quick training, hardening her like tempered steel. If her physical condition had been perfect, she was sure she could have commanded victory. Now, though, Saya had doubts.

Anshel's expression didn't change, but the grip on her wrist suddenly doubled in strength.

"Erkk . . ."

She began to lose sensation in her fingertips and her sword fell from her hand.

But now, focusing on her, Anshel was away from his queen's side.

"Hagi!"

Answering Saya's call, the dark-clad man leapt from the scaffolding above the stage.

He swung his cello case down like a giant hammer. Diva looked up and saw that she was the target of his attack, but showed no fear.

As Hagi swooped down like a hawk to its prey, another man suddenly appeared.

Nathan.

Hagi frowned as he tried to brush the other Chevalier away with the claws of his right hand.

Nathan ducked and grabbed Hagi's arm, easily flinging him toward the ground.

Hagi was able to twist himself around so he landed on two feet, but when he raised his head to see his opponent, Nathan was already behind him.

"Looking for *moi*?" Nathan grabbed the cellist from behind as he whispered into his ear.

The arms he wrapped around Hagi were not flesh and blood, but sharp blades. From the elbow forward, the blond Chevalier's arms had transformed into those of a praying mantis. Now, Nathan's serrated forearms had Hagi locked down tight. Hagi's skin was torn open and blood soaked his black suit.

"Hagi!"

"How about worrying about your own body?"

With those words Anshel's fingers crushed down as hard as a tiger's bite. Her wrist bones were pulverized like dry sticks, and Saya cried out in pain.

However, she bit down on that agony, and quickly shifted her body. She slipped her right foot under the grip of her precious sword. She kicked the blade up lightly, balancing the sword on its point. In a single graceful arc, she grabbed the handle with her right hand and swung her katana at Anshel's throat.

Anshel deflected the blow easily, knocking the blade aside.

Then, ignoring Saya on the ground, he focused his gaze on Diva.

"How shall we proceed?"

"Well, Kai is watching, so we might as well kill her." She sounded like a child deciding to toss out a broken toy.

"Stop!" Kai held his pistol with both hands and fired.

The first igniter bullet, aimed at Anshel's forehead, exploded into sparks in midair.

The Chevalier was unhurt. He had swatted the bullet out of the air with his hand, as easily as he could have swatted a fly.

No longer distracted by Kai's attack, Anshel extended his right hand toward Saya's neck.

What stopped him was the shriek of a child.

"Sounds like it started," he said.

After the boy's scream came a rising wave of panicked sounds from the other side of the stage.

It sounded as if the several hundred audience members had begun to move at once, and the ground vibrated under their feet.

Saya suddenly sensed a different sort of life form mixed in among the terrified humans.

Chiropterans. Saya was sure of it.

"The outbreak was within the expected time range, but we may need to make some adjustments." Anshel spoke to himself

as he looked toward the stage. Saya forgot the pain in her wrist as she scowled at him.

"Why . . . Why are you doing this . . . ?"

She knew that Cinq Flèches' Delta 67 could turn humans into Chiropterans at will. But what wasn't clear was the purpose of such an experiment now.

Anshel responded to that question with silence.

His hand completed its journey to Saya's throat.

"You have beautiful eyes. It's too bad they will lose their sparkle."

Without a pause, Anshel tightened his grip around Saya's throat.

"Urk . . . krgl . . ."

As her esophagus was being squeezed tight, cutting off the supply of oxygen, Saya grasped Anshel's arm with her right hand. But she had no strength left.

Her field of vision faded to black and she lost consciousness.

"Get away from Saya!"

"Think you can shoot me?"

Anshel calmly brushed off Kai's angry cry.

Kai hesitated in pulling the trigger, and the center of Saya's back swung between the muzzle of his gun and its target.

"Shit."

Kai couldn't just stand there and watch Saya be killed. If his pistol was useless, then he would resort to using his bare fists. Even if it meant throwing his life away, it was worth it if it might help Saya.

Just as Kai was about to rush Anshel, the Chevalier's legs collapsed under him.

The night air rang.

Anshel's face stiffened nervously, and he dropped Saya to the ground.

A moment later, Diva's face was splattered with blood—not her own, but Anshel's.

Anshel stood in front of Diva. The blow intended for her had instead bitten into his raised right palm. The blade that had made the cut was incredibly sharp—and obviously strong. The trailer wall behind Diva had been bisected by a line less than a millimeter thick. Water, or maybe gasoline, spilled from its tank and pooled on the concrete.

Diva's expression did not change as she wiped the blood from her face with her hand then brought the tips of her fingers to her lips.

Her eyes moved from Anshel to Saya.

Now Saya, who had been crumpled on the ground a moment before, was being lifted carefully by a black-clad young man.

For a moment, Kai felt he was seeing an echo from the past, something like *déjà vu*.

Nighttime in Okinawa, in a classroom at Koza Commercial High School. That was the first time he laid eyes on Hagi.

Like Hagi, this man wore a suit the same color as the night, and he held Saya with the same balance of affection and respect.

"Solomon . . . Goldsmith . . . ?"

In Kai's half-consciousness, the name of Diva's Chevalier fell from his lips.



Solomon's handsome face appeared, bathed in the moonlight, as he looked up from Saya in his arms to his queen and brothers.

His eyes were greeted by Anshel's growing rage. "It's not enough to break up the Chevaliers, but now you need to turn your blade on Diva?"

Solomon looked listlessly at his older brother after hearing the question.

"I want to live alone with Saya. That is all I wish for."

The attack on Diva moments earlier hadn't been meant to kill her. Also, Kai didn't think Solomon was bothering with coercion tactics. Maybe he had known Anshel would protect Diva, so to get Anshel away from Saya, Solomon had made one restrained attack.

But there were still more questions than answers. For starters, what had happened between the brothers? To see a Chevalier turn his blade against his queen was unheard of.

"Farewell, Diva . . . Niisan."

Solomon lifted off the ground.

In moments he was high above the stage with Saya in his arms.

"Saya!"

When Kai looked up, Solomon had already melted into the night sky.

"Shall I follow them?" Anshel's inquiry did nothing to soothe Diva.

"Enough, it's done. Everyone is *Saya-neesama* this and *Saya-neesama* that . . . I'm sick of it."

Diva pouted.

"Anyway, I still have these two."

The look on her face as she rubbed her belly implied she had already forgotten about Saya and Solomon.

She preyed on humans, so it was natural that this monster understood being preyed on, but when it came to her own children, the rules changed. For half a moment Kai forgot that this was Riku's killer.

Diva looked up at Kai and smiled.

"Next, you become my Chevalier."

Kai couldn't answer. Concern for Saya overpowered his feelings about avenging Riku's death. He should have chased after Solomon, but a human could never have caught up to a Chevalier.

But if Kai were a Chevalier . . .

He immediately looked toward Hagi, who was still stuck in Nathan's grip.

"Saya . . ."

Hagi's eyes followed Solomon's path into the darkness, and he groaned, straining against Nathan's arms.

Little by little Hagi was able to loosen Nathan's grip enough to free his arms. Eventually his strength exceeded Nathan's.

Hagi wriggled his arms above Nathan's and grabbed them. Nathan's hands were just like swords. Hagi's wrists were stained with blood.

Hagi didn't even seem to notice the pain. He forcibly spread open Nathan's arms and threw him to the ground. Nathan crashed hard enough into the concrete to crack it. As he stood up, Hagi's foot slammed into his solar plexus.

Nathan's body soared in a straight line toward the trailer, and he broke through the exterior wall with a thunderous boom, rolling the trailer onto its side.

A burst of smoke and debris rose up as if the ground had been hit with an artillery shell.

However, Hagi didn't have the time to finish the fight.

Ignoring his wounds, Hagi scanned the night sky as Kai called to him.

"Are you going?"

"I have nothing but Saya. So—"

A moment later Hagi's long body soared up into the sky.

The sudden blast of air ruffled Kai's bangs and he felt like saying a prayer for Hagi as he watched him disappear into the black.

In fact, all Kai could do was pray. He was no more than human.

But surely George and Riku, looking down on him, would approve of Kai choosing not to become a Chevalier. Probably Saya would, too.

"C'mon, Nathan. We're leaving."

Diva stood on top of the overturned trailer. Through the hole, Nathan looked like a disheveled tornado survivor still buried under the furniture and things tossed around inside.

". . . That was quite a rehearsal."

"Hurry up. It seems uninvited guests have arrived."

Anshel urged him as his eyes peered toward the stage.

Nathan tossed away a huge, solid-wood wardrobe that easily weighed 300 kilos with one hand and lifted himself up.

"Schiff? Tonight, the entire cast is making an appearance."

Kai knew that Chiropterans had the ability to detect other

kinds of Chiropterans. Either way, it sounded like Moses and the others were here now, too.

"I don't remember giving them permission to see Diva. There's no need to stay here and chat with them."

"Indeed. Eventually their scene in the play will come along." Standing beside Anshel, Nathan voiced his agreement.

The two knights flanked their queen on the left and right, and the three vanished into the night wind.

WHEN SHE WOKE up, Saya was no longer at the Chiropteran-infested army base.

Above the snow-white sheets, Saya slowly opened her eyes, and her eyebrows furrowed in fear.

She quickly sat up to get a look at where she was.

She was in a spacious, modern-looking bedroom. The interior design and amenities were all very high class. Even in a country like America, where so much wealth was concentrated, this was the residence of an especially special someone.

Saya slipped off a king-sized bed nearly as large as a six-tatami-mat room in Japan. In quick succession, she realized first that she wasn't wearing any clothes, and then that her fractured wrist had almost completely healed while she slept.

In her present condition, any injury as severe as a fractured bone took several hours to repair itself. This meant that at least that much time had passed.

She wrapped herself in a sheet and walked across the floor trying to make no noise. Without her katana Saya felt helpless.

A white dress was set out on the chair in front of the dresser.

The dress was clean and simply cut, but the ornamentation reminded Saya of a wedding dress. It seemed like there were purposely no other clothes in the room, so with no other choice, Saya slipped the dress on. It was full length, but easier to move around in than the bed sheet.

This bedroom also adjoined a second-story loft. Saya realized that when she sensed someone was walking down the stairs.

*Chiropteran.*

"So you woke up all right?"

Solomon smiled from the stairs.

Something was different about him. Saya realized that it was her clothing—or, rather, its color—that was disorienting her.

He was dressed in a suit as black as midnight.

Solomon had always worn white, as if he were clean and separating himself from the pollutants of the world, but now he wore clothes the color of night, just like Hagi did.

"... Where are my clothes?"

She might have dropped her sword, but Saya was sure she hadn't been naked when Solomon had found her.

"They were dirty, so I disposed of them. You look much better in a dress than with a sword."

Solomon smiled as if fawning on a flower. Saya turned away.

She walked to the far end of the room, being careful not to trip over the hem of the dress. Most of one wall was glass, and Saya had a bird's-eye view of the Manhattan skyline.

"I put it on only because there was nothing else to wear." Saya's voice was cold as she subtly looked about the room for an exit.

But Saya could sense Solomon's strong feelings. That much she understood.

"Why?" Solomon asked, looking at her sadly.

Saya had trouble meeting his eyes. "Why? . . . You and I are enemies. You are supposed to hate the enemy you are trying to kill."

If he could see it that way, it would make things many times easier. The relationship between enemies was restricted to battle only. Diva and her Chevalier couldn't seem to understand that in the same way the Schiff did.

Saya was trying to kill her sister. That was the reason for her very existence. Diva was working to the same end.

Knowing that, why would Solomon try to help Saya?

Above all, she didn't want him to do anything that would threaten her resolve. She had spent so much time sharpening her sword—Saya feared that this kind of affection would only dull her edge.

". . . You are the only one for me." Solomon wrung the words from his lips. "I am no longer Diva's Chevalier. I have thrown everything away."

"Everything . . . ?"

"Yes. My time as Diva's Chevalier, my bond with my brothers, my status and fortune, and finally, Diva herself . . . Everything."

Solomon's black suit made him look like he was in mourning. A Chevalier's unchanging existence rotated around the life of his queen, and he had cast all that aside.

"But why?"

"So you and I can be together."

"Wha—?" Without thinking, she stopped her question mid-word. He was gazing straight at her and his tone had been so serious.

Before she could put her hand on her pounding heart to try to calm herself, Solomon repeated what he had said.

"So that you and I can be together for eternity."

Saya had lost her voice, and just stared at the young man's pale blue eyes.

Solomon was Hagi's mirror image.

Hagi protected her and did everything he could to make her desires come true. When it was all over, he would grant her one final wish. The end of eternity . . .

But now, Solomon tempted her.

"I don't want to let you fight any more. I don't want you to be hurt any more than you already have been."

To pull at the strings of Saya's bewildered and swaying heart, Solomon strengthened the tone of his voice.

"I want to make you smile again."

He had kept those few minutes when they had danced together at the school in Vietnam in his heart this whole time. To Saya, the memory of that night—how she had felt, and how much she had smiled—felt like a very long time ago.

"That's why I want us to be together . . ."

He reached out to her, and Saya pulled back. She dodged his hand and ran to the terrace handrail.

However, aware of her failing strength, Saya hesitated to jump. It was about twenty meters to the closest neighboring



building. Under normal circumstances, she could have made the jump, but right now it felt like an abysmal valley.

"Don't come closer!" Saya turned around and tried to make her voice as sharp as possible as she yelled at the man walking toward her.

"Why won't you take my hand?"

Once again, Solomon put his hand out to her, and his beautiful face looked both sad and confused.

Seeing his face also made Saya feel sad. Didn't he understand why she was fighting with Diva? "You are only thinking about you and me! You haven't even begun to consider anyone else's feelings!"

Solomon smiled at her. "When I say I need you, I don't mean that you have to leave everyone important to you behind. You have a family you love. I look forward to being a part of their lives."

For a moment Saya didn't know how to answer that.

The old Solomon had thought that loving someone was a mistake, but he seemed to have changed his mind. Now he was ready to accept humans into his life without hesitation.

". . . What is it you want?" There had to be something in it for him. Saya believed this with all her heart, and glared at him suspiciously. "Are you going to trick me and secretly send me to Diva? Or do you just want to kill me?"

"Saya." His voice was soft, but it was the intensity in his eyes that kept Saya from replying. "In my long life, the only person who has made my heart beat like this is you. That's why . . ."

To prove his point he took a step closer to Saya, shrinking the distance between them. Her legs shook.

The knowledge that he held her in his heart made Saya's own heart race.

"... That's why I want you to be my bride."

The sheer surreality of the statement cleared Saya's head. The thought of being someone's wife had never entered her mind before. The marriage proposal from Solomon's mouth lost its meaning in midair, and sounded more like a series of curious noises.

"Do you know, there's an island where rainbow-colored roses bloom every day?"

"Hn?" Saya was perplexed by the sudden non sequitur.

"And a place where the ocean floor sparkles with diamonds. There are so many gorgeous places in this world you have yet to see." Solomon continued speaking, his voice full of intensity. "I want to show you all of this world's marvels. I want to break the chains of destiny and walk together freely under the blue sky, to let you experience that we are part of this glorious world and all its wonders."

"To fly free around the world . . . I used to dream of that."

That thought had occupied her mind constantly when she was a naïve daughter of the Zoo. She and Hagi had gone on countless small expeditions together, and the memories were still precious to her.

Yet, the real world was cold and cruel, and fate could not be left to fantasy.

After the Zoo had burned to the ground, the outside world had greeted them with fear and hatred. Hunted like goblins, they had been forced to hide themselves in the rafters.

At that time it had been Hagi who had rescued her, but there was no way she could make up to him the amount of pain she had already cost him. Hagi did what he could to protect her . . . and she fought the Chiropterans to protect humans . . . so why did blood need to be spilled?

Saya had held that thought in the back of her mind as she and Hagi had set off on their journey together.

Despite her hopes, theirs had not been a trip full of laughter and surprises, but one of few words. They were hunters seeking their targets, hiding themselves in the night fog.

Ever since Saya had woken up in Okinawa, her journey had carried her many different places, but they all had ended up as battlefields, and she had left a trail of blood everywhere she went.

Through all of that, she had clung to the same dream.

But it was Solomon who had said it.

He spoke again. "If this is your dream, then I will make it come true."

Saya shook her head strongly, flushing the overindulgent words from her head. "I can't do that. It was a dream I left behind a long time ago . . . I can't go back to those days. I just can't."

Back then, there had been the kind Joel and the playful Hagi, and the tranquil passing of the days—an innocent time she could never return to.

"No, that isn't true." Solomon lifted her chin with his finger.

Saya raised her head up. His face was so close she could feel his breath. She couldn't help but look into his eyes.

"You may think you left it behind, but we can get it back. Our lives will last an eternity. We have all the time we need. From this moment on, everything I have is yours."

"No . . . I can't! You are Diva's Chevalier."

"Before that, I am a man that loves you."

He brought his lips close to Saya's, but she ducked his kiss and slapped him across the cheek with her right hand.

It had been pure reflex, a violent reaction that had risen from her confusion. It was Saya, not Solomon, who trembled after the slap.

"I . . ."

She began to apologize, but the look on Solomon's face made her stumble on her words.

Once again, he pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her.

It was a forceful embrace, but Saya was no longer afraid. The warmth of his body felt very natural up against hers.

"I have made my choice to be with you rather than stay with Diva. That's why I am here. I will protect you, Saya . . . I will fulfill your every wish."

Like a teenager professing his first love, he spoke honestly and directly.

Saya closed her eyes and let several seconds pass.

For a moment, she wanted to accept his emotions into her heart and let go of all her burdens. And if she did, what would happen? He seemed earnest and sincere when he said he would take care of her. What if they could live peacefully together for eternity . . . ?

But try as she might, Saya couldn't imagine it as more than a fantasy.

Even if they couldn't make the same promises as Solomon, there were those she loved in this reality more. Just like Solomon, they needed her.

"... What I want is to kill Diva. Nothing more."

It didn't feel like it was her hand that pushed Solomon away from her body.

"..."

Solomon's blue eyes sunk sadly.

Saya pretended not to see his sorrow and pressed him with more questions. "Are you going to fight at my side? Can you fight Diva?"

He said he had cast away his love for Diva, but she was still his family. It didn't seem like it was something he could do.

But it really didn't matter.

He would never be Saya's Chevalier. No matter how painful the choice he had made, she couldn't expect him to go against his blood. He had his path and she had hers.

Suddenly his face went blurry.

For a second Saya thought she must have been crying, but that wasn't it.

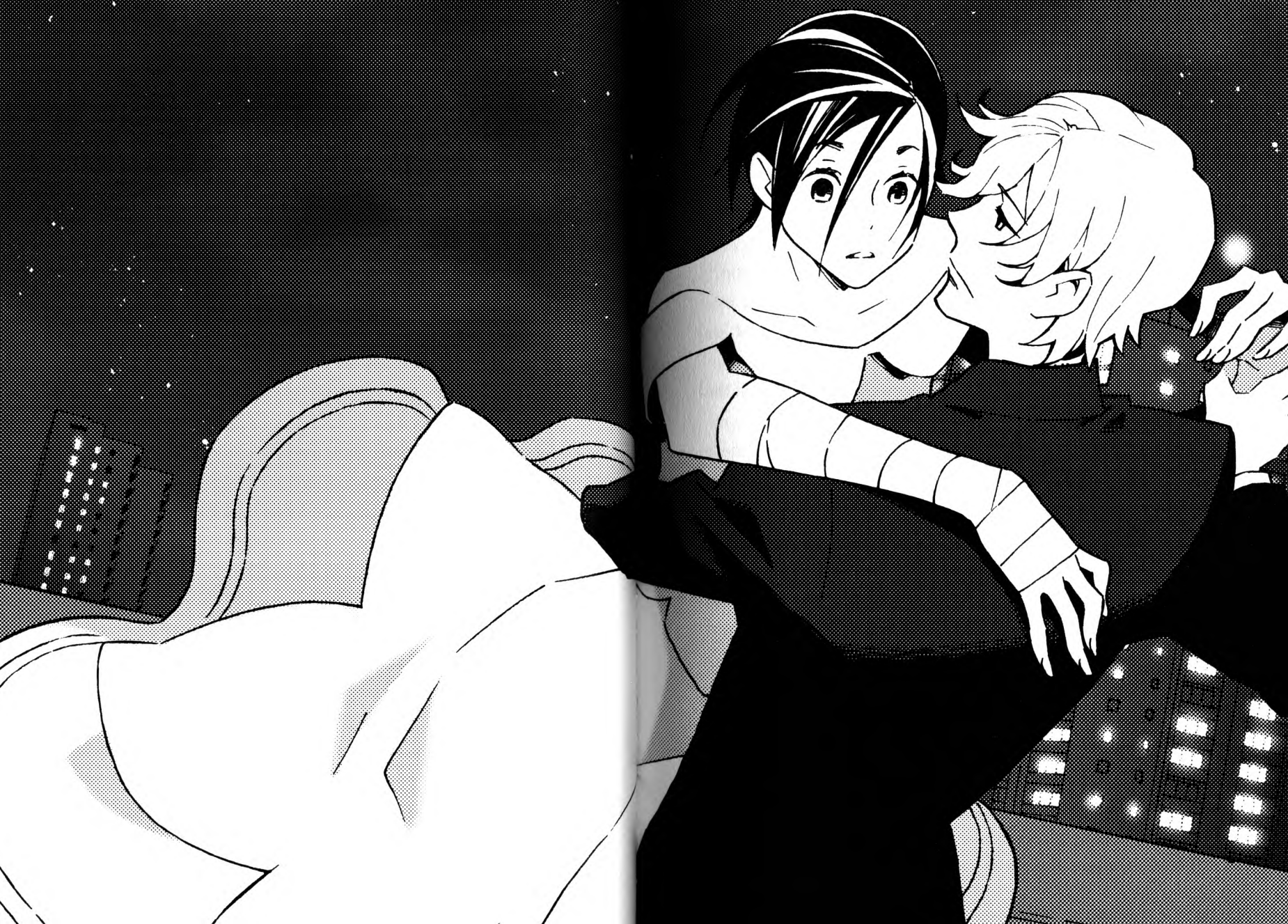
It was a sign of her upcoming "sleep."

"Saya?"

Solomon supported her weakened body in his arms.

"I'm OK..."

Saya tried to push off her knees to stand up, but she had no strength in her legs.



He looked at her with grave concern.

"... You looked almost like you were falling asleep. And it is taking longer for your injuries to heal... Your sleep is approaching, isn't it?"

There was no use hiding these facts from a Chevalier.

"Now I know why you are in such a hurry to fight."

"..."

"If your wish is for Diva to die... then I will kill her for you."

Solomon's proposal made Saya pause for breath.

There was no hesitation in his resolve. At that moment his eyes looked a lot like Hagi's.

"If it meant we could be together, I would walk through the fires of hell."

He traced his hand down her cheek and brushed his thumb across her lips.

"Just give me the order, from your beautiful lips."

Solomon drew in as if to kiss her again. This time, Saya did not resist.

But the instant before their lips met, a flash of silver cut through the dark night. Solomon caught her up in his arms as his hand shot out and plucked a cross-shaped dagger from the air.

Saya turned to the direction the weapon had come flying from. "Hagi...!"

She could see the shape of the Chevalier born from her blood.

Hagi stood inside the opposite end of the terrace, and the fire in the eyes glaring at Solomon was fueled by an undying sense of duty to Saya.

"I will not allow you to have her."



"Does Saya *belong* to you?" Solomon punctuated his sarcastic reply with a flip of his wrist that sent Hagi's dagger spinning back at its owner.

The return trip of the dagger was faster than Hagi had thrown it, and Hagi had to scramble to catch it.

As Solomon faced off against Hagi, he kept his left arm around Saya's shoulders. She could feel his strength.

"So if I go against my Chevalier path and profess my love for Saya?"

". . . I will stay by Saya's side." Hagi's reply to Solomon's question was brief.

"I'm afraid there's no future for you and Saya. Your time together . . . has passed."

Solomon's tone was gentle but as cold as a steel blade.

Hagi's face remained almost perfectly still, but his eyes glowed like twin flames. "Every moment that goes by, I live for the sake of Saya. That will be as true in the future as it has been in the past."

That was indeed how he had spent the last 110 years, and his words now reverberated with the force of his conviction.

"Hagi . . ." Saya whispered.

His figure seemed almost to glow against the dark sky, and Saya squinted her eyes.

Solomon gently put Saya down, then stepped before her, blocking her view of Hagi. "I do not want to have to fight with you, but I am ready to . . ."

Saya could sense the anguish coming from Hagi. However, his hand gripped his dagger once again. Just as the sparkle of the blade reached her eyes, Saya screamed out.



"Hagi, stop!"

"..."

Hagi froze, and Solomon smiled.

Saya realized she was protecting Solomon, and it caused a shiver to pass over her entire body.

She tried to find the reason she had cried out, but couldn't.

Hagi looked over Solomon's shoulder at her, and in his black pupils there was no condemnation. They were only colored with a deep, clear sadness.

Saya's chest hurt, as if she had swallowed a mouthful of needles.

"If it is what she desires, then you can, of course, remain as one of Saya's attendants."

Solomon's offer was a sharp jab at Hagi's pride.

"You are not my master."

"Of course not."

Chevaliers followed only one master. Solomon was just now beginning to realize what he had lost when he had cast away Diva in hopes of winning Saya.

Hagi glared. "I am taking Saya home."

"I cannot let you do that. Saya is going to be my bride."

Solomon's right hand stretched and transformed into a long golden blade.

Lit up by the light from the city, the two beautiful men looked like reflections of each other.

"Saya is everything I have."

*Not master, not queen, but his everything . . .* Saya tried to absorb Hagi's words as the white bandage loosened from his right hand, revealing the hard skin of a beast.

"The dog that isn't obedient must be punished." A vicious grin spread across Solomon's cheeks just before he leaped into the air.

Suddenly sparks flew just before Hagi's face.

Solomon rushed him in a burst of wind. Hagi caught his blade in his claw just short of his face, but the impact caused the tall man to stagger backwards.

Solomon's blade danced in the air like a symphony-conductor's baton. It was like a hundred fencers coming at him at the same time, and Hagi had to tap all his extraordinary skills to defend himself from attacks coming from every direction.

There was no pause in the violent frenzy. Saya's ears began to ring from the noise.

Saya felt dizzy and held onto the handrail as she saw Solomon thrust his blade directly into Hagi's side.

"... Hagi!"

"You had better stay out of our way—forever!" Solomon tossed Hagi into the air and was already pursuing him again with his blade pointed forward.

Hagi tried and failed to block the attack with his right hand, and the tip of Solomon's sword entered Hagi's chest.

Hagi spat up blood as his head flew back, and, with Saya's Chevalier still stuck on his arm, Solomon jumped down to the rooftop of the building across the street. Hagi slipped from his blade at the edge of the roof, and, spraying a line of blood from his chest, fell into a storage tank.

The tank dented like an aluminum can, and Hagi rebounded, only to plummet off the edge between the two buildings.

Saya extended her arm as if to save him, but in her hazy state of consciousness, there was nothing she could do to help.

Still, she had to stop them from fighting . . . Her vision wavered, but she stood weakly.

For a moment she didn't realize how far her body was leaning over.

She understood what was happening only after her body had spilled over the handrail and was falling through the still night air.

The white dress billowed like a blooming moonflower.

The moment Solomon caught sight of the falling Saya his entire body froze.

He should never have left her alone in such a dangerously high place in her condition. His fight with Hagi had brought out sadism and negligence that weren't normally part of his character. He shouldn't have gone so far to show him his determination. But his jealousy of Hagi as Saya's Chevalier had pushed him too far.

This was not something a man should lose himself to so easily.

His pride was meaningless when compared to Saya's safety.

"Saya!"

He immediately leapt from the rooftop. As Solomon flew through the air, he saw a shadow speeding before his eyes, faster than wind.

It was Hagi.

The man who was falling like a rag doll toward the ground just a few moments earlier was gliding through the air like a falcon.

The black wings extending from his back must have been one of the gifts he received with his transformation into a Chevalier.

The black shape arched back and swept up Saya's falling body before turning upward, soaring high above the houses, and floating gently down again to settle on a rooftop.

Saya slowly opened her eyes.

"Hagi . . . ?"

"Saya, please forgive me. I had hoped . . . you would not have to see me like this again."

Saya's eyes seemed to reflect his pain, and Hagi's brow wrinkled in distress.

Solomon landed on the ground and watched carefully as Hagi and Saya landed safely on the other end of the alley.

"So that's the true form of Saya's first Chevalier."

Chevaliers were supposed to protect their queens from danger, whatever that took. Hagi's love for Saya would have forced him to take down anyone—human or Chiropteran—who threatened her. He had taken down humans when they had escaped from the Zoo, and the fear and horror on Saya's face had made Hagi resolve to keep his true form hidden.

Until now, in battle with Solomon or his brothers, Hagi had never revealed more of himself than his right hand. When fighting Chevaliers of equal strength, this was a serious handicap. But now, for the first time in more than a century, Hagi had released his hidden strength. To protect Saya, to bring her back, he had needed every resource available to him.

Solomon raised his arm.

"... I'm sorry. I wish..." Saya whispered clumsily.

She was speaking from the heart, but to Solomon's ears, it was the sound of hopelessness, the end of anything they could have had.

"I can kill Diva for you!" Solomon shouted before he realized what he had said.

It was a frantic cry to prevent Saya from leaving him. The love he had once held in his chest for Diva was gone. All he could see was Saya before him.

But Saya slowly shook her head.

"No. That's the one thing I have to do by myself. I started this fight..."

She turned to her Chevalier.

"... Hagi, let's go."

"Of course." There was no malice in his voice, or even pride at winning Saya back. His only concern was what she wanted.

Was it because of their bond of blood?

A queen and her Chevalier—the leader and the disciple. They were master and servant, sharing one mind and one soul. No one could come between two people in a relationship like that.

However, paired with his own queen, Solomon had the potential to become Saya's mate. Saya didn't need to think of him as replacing Hagi. She could return Solomon's love... but she chose not to.

Solomon's hands balled into fists. He yelled after her, "Diva is... carrying your younger brother's babies."

The expression on Saya's face changed.

She gasped, and her body stiffened in shock. Her mouth clenched with distress.

*Those beautiful lips . . .* Seeing Saya troubled was by no means Solomon's desire. But more than the sting of defeat or jealousy of Hagi, it had been the fear of losing Saya that had made his mouth speak reflexively before his brain had consciously put the words together.

He needed her to know that she needed him.

"Do you really think you can do it? Can you kill Diva and Riku's children—your own family?"

There was no way.

Saya loved Riku no end. The way she had changed after his death was so obvious it hurt. Tormented by feelings of loss and guilt, she had probably decided that she was better off alone, without family and friends.

And that was the very reason she wouldn't be able to kill Diva's babies. They might have been the offspring of her most hated enemy, but they were also Riku's children, which made them family.

But Solomon could do it. He confirmed that fact in his own head.

To satisfy Saya's wish, to bring her happiness, he could kill Diva and her babies without a moment of hesitation.

*That's why . . .*

Saya stared at Solomon as though he had torn the heart from her chest.

He had been trying to explain . . . All he wanted was to be by her side. Even if she didn't want to be his bride. As long as they were together, nothing else mattered.

"..."

Saya's face bent forward as tears welled up in her eyes, when a black curtain seemed to embrace her from behind.

Hagi's wings.

Solomon had meant to end Saya's battle and release her from suffering. But it was too late. Hagi had already rescued her from that sea of agony with a flap of his wings.

A sudden squall stirred the dust around his feet.

There was nothing Solomon could do but watch his love and her Chevalier fly away.

One night felt like three days.

When he was helpless to act, his impatience weighed down on him, dragging time to a near standstill.

More than anything, Kai was upset at his powerlessness.

He couldn't protect his family. He couldn't help Saya.

In that case, what use was he?

If he had the power of a Chevalier, he could really fight for Saya. He had practiced using a pistol, trained his body, and disciplined himself into preparation for battle. But he longed for Hagi's strength and immortality.

*No, not really.*

Protecting Saya was Hagi's duty. What Kai needed to do was trust Saya and wait.

Hagi was the one who hovered close enough to Saya to follow her commands and protect her, but Kai believed that should have been his responsibility—after all, he was her only family.

Mostly, though, he hoped she was OK.

Solomon had kidnapped her the previous night, and Kai couldn't imagine eating or sleeping until she had gotten home safe.

"Did you just get back?" Mao's eyes widened as she walked into the living room from the hallway.

She looked like she had just gotten out of the shower. She ruffled a towel through her wet hair as her eyes scanned the dark room. "Where is everybody?" she asked.

Louis, David, and Okamura were gone. Of course, so were Saya and Hagi.

". . . Louis and Julia are at the hospital with David. Louis called a bit ago to say that David made it out of surgery OK. Okamura is following up on the riot at the base." Kai's tongue felt heavy as he gave his answer, and he didn't have the energy to lift his head to look at her.

"Again with the grumpy face."

"Can it."

Mao sat down on the couch and peered at him. "I thought you had grown up more."

"Sorry I'm still so immature." Kai knew she was trying to get a rise out of him. Even back at home, when he had been in a bad mood or feeling down, Mao had forcibly pulled him out of the bog by making him angry.

But he was too tired to get angry. And Mao was right—he wasn't an adult yet. Particularly when it came to Saya, Kai still couldn't keep his cool.

". . ."



Mao draped the towel around her neck and she looked him over in silence. Then, she suddenly leaned over, and, before Kai could even voice his surprise, pressed her lips against his.

Mao quickly pulled back as if ridiculing him because his body had frozen up.

"You are such a fool. Keep that up and someone else will scoop her up before you know it."

"Don't you . . ."

She did it to get him to say it out loud.

Saya wasn't a thing. Scooped up or not scooped up, it had been a stupid thing for Mao to say.

The grim look Kai gave to Mao made it clear how disturbed he was at what she had said.

However, when he turned to glare at Mao, he saw she had a serious look in her eyes, and Kai felt a change in the air pressure.

"I love you, Kai. That's why I followed you this far."

Kai didn't know how to respond to the intensity in her voice.

"But the only thing you think about is Saya, isn't it? Will there ever be room for me?"

" . . ."

Kai took in a deep breath to make an excuse, but no words would come out. He didn't want to talk about this, but he had been thickheaded and selfish, and it wouldn't be fair to Mao to blow her off or lie to her.

Suddenly Mao's expression softened.

" . . . But I forgive you for pushing me away."

"Pushing away . . . You what?" Kai yelled incredulously.

Mao had been playing with him the whole time.

"An earnest and worthy woman is doing all she can for you, so you could at least return the favor." She smacked him playfully on the back of the head as, with indifferent-looking body language, she finally gave in to her impulse to laugh.

She laughed so hard and loud it was hard for others not to be infected by it. This time, Kai noticed a hint of loneliness in the corner of her eye—a shimmer, like a glass sparkle—but pretended not to notice anything and stood up from the couch.

"Are you mad?" she asked

"I'm going to make breakfast. You'll eat, right?" He needed to make some for Saya, too. She would be hungry when she got home.

As he walked to the kitchen, his legs felt lighter. The unfinished business still weighed on his shoulders, but the morning sunlight seemed to clear his head. Mao had snapped him out of his funk.

In the end, Mao was more of an adult than Kai was. Kai realized this as he turned on the electric stove and set a frying pan on the burner.

Kai put bacon grease in the pan and added eggs and wheat gluten. Next he chopped up vegetables and tossed them into the mix along with a little rock salt and sesame oil.

He was still nowhere near the chef George had been, but Kai was sure this would be more than enough to revitalize Saya.

Kai and Mao heard the front door open and turned their heads at the same time. At the end of the hallway stood Hagi—and Saya.

It was obvious from the way she walked into the living room that she was completely exhausted. However, what caused Kai to pause was the snow-white getup she was draped in.

"What's with the dress . . . ?" Mao, of course, was never speechless for long.

The white dress looked like something a bride would wear to her wedding.

Saya didn't respond and Hagi watched over her in silence. Kai wondered what had happened.

He remembered the hot griddle and rushed back to the kitchen.

"By the time you change the food will be ready. Eat up! Eat up! This is good stuff!"

Kai laughed as he lifted up a spatula. He was talking like George from behind the counter after Saya came home from track practice.

He had a thousand questions to ask her, but they could wait. Hagi had brought Saya home safely. Now Kai would do what he could for her, too.

"K . . ."

Her face looked as rigid as a rock, but Kai saw a faint twinkle in her eye.

"I'll take a shower."

Mao watched Saya head to the bathroom and then kneed Kai in the hip.

"What the hell is 'eat up, eat up'? Don't you mean 'welcome home, Honey, kiss kiss'?"

"Leave me alone." Kai responded to the jeering with a grimace as he drained a package of tofu.

His cooking hands never stopped moving, but his mind was somewhere else.

Diva was pregnant with Riku's children.

He had to tell Saya.



He imagined that this was what it must have felt like to float in his mother's womb.

The liquid surrounding his body was only slightly warmer than body temperature and more buoyant than water. Intubation allowed him to continue breathing, and as a Chevalier, he was immune to infection. Overall, it wasn't an unpleasant experience.

James Ironside was a proud Chevalier.

To protect Diva and take out the enemy, he needed to get out, and every second counted.

"How is he progressing?"

He could hear the voice even through the fluid and the thick acrylic walls of the cylindrical tank.

Anshel was looking into the tank. Next to him stood Nathan and Van Argeno from Cinq Flèches America.

"Positive. We are not seeing any rejection at the interface junctions. Dr. Collins is still unaccounted for, but we have all the data from Karl's surgeries." As usual, Van answered the question while sucking on a piece of candy like a child.

"Will Commander Ironside be in good-enough condition to be reinstated next week? I understand he may not be all the way back to his old self."

The majority of James's flesh had been torn from his body by Saya, crystallized, and scattered over Christina Island.

Normally, this would have meant death. Karl had proved that if the crystallizing area could be cut off from the body, then the

Chiropteran could still live, but in James's case the affected area was too great.

James had lost everything from the chest down.

His brain and heart were uninjured, so life-support had been unhindered, but without arms and legs, he was helpless. He had been grateful to Nathan for pulling him out of the pit on Christina Island, but he had also hated him for exposing him in such a disgraceful state.

Chevaliers had incredible healing powers, but once tissue had been crystallized, it could not regenerate. Collins had been unable to explain the phenomenon, but James remembered Anshel remarking, "Fear is what destroys the flesh."

James hadn't agreed with Anshel's lyrical speech at the time, but now that it had actually happened to him, he could understand a little better what Anshel had meant.

Saya was a formidable enemy.

Her blood should be feared. Above all, she absolutely could not be allowed near Diva.

Right now, James was itching to fight Saya again. The arms and legs he had lost were replaced, more powerful than before. Already, he knew he would not be defeated. The next time would be a triumph, for Diva's sake . . .

From behind Anshel came a pale, elfin figure. It was his queen, and her eyes met his loving gaze.

She looked him over from top to bottom, as if she were evaluating a piece of art in a gallery. But her initial fascination seemed to fade, and soon her cute lips curled down in dissatisfaction.

"This thing isn't my James!"

"Oh?"

Nathan turned his head in curiosity, and Anshel smiled affectionately.

"Is there something you don't like?"

"If this is how he is going to end up, it would have been better just to have taken Kai as a Chevalier!"

The look on her sulking face was that of an impatient child who has returned home only to realize it had bought the wrong toy at the store.

Neither Anshel nor Nathan could bring himself to scold her. She was fickle, yes, but above all, she was their queen.

"..."

Naturally, James did not feel resentment for Diva's change in feelings. Instead, he was disappointed in himself for not being satisfactory in Diva's eyes. And most of all, he was concerned about a human boy named Kai.

To make *him* a Chevalier to replace James—that boy!

James closed his eyes as he floated in the tank. It felt like he was inside a womb. Only now, the womb was poisonous, filled with filthy sewage.

LULU PERCHED ON the windowsill and peered into the room.

It was on the fourth floor of an apartment building.

Only birds or maybe stray cats would use a place like this to go in and out. Not one of the humans in the room had noticed her yet. But Saya, who was lying on the couch, had turned around, and Hagi had looked at her without saying a word as he leaned against the wall.

They must have been able to smell her when she got near them. Neither of them looked surprised.

Or maybe it was the fact that she came at the same time every week . . .

"So Diva's pregnant . . ." Louis rested a knee on the table.

"You said they are Riku's babies . . . Can that really be true?" Kai's face looked serious as he turned to a white woman in her late twenties whom Lulu had never seen before.

"If we believe Anshel's words, then yes."

"How far along are the fetuses, Julia?"

Julia turned her eyes downward as Louis asked his question.

"According to the ultrasound, they are at about eight weeks. That's by human standards, of course."

"If they are Riku's babies, then she's been pregnant for at least a year," Louis pointed out.

"But they could be born tomorrow, or maybe it'll be another ten years. She's a Chiropteran . . . Unfortunately, we can't predict when it will be."

"What we do know for sure is after the babies are born we will have two more enemies to take out." Louis's belly rose and fell as he let out a long sigh. Seeing the size of his stomach, Lulu wondered about human appetites.

Lulu no longer fed from humans, but if she had, Louis looked like he might have been tasty. Humans didn't usually engage in cannibalism, so, like Chiropterans, they didn't feed off of each other.

But then, they killed each other in huge numbers for the sake of war. It didn't make sense. They didn't kill for food, but they did to protect their territory.

At the moment, though, Lulu was more concerned with eavesdropping on the conversation that was taking place in the next room.

Diva was pregnant. Lulu was pretty sure that meant she was in the final stage of creating the next generation of her own kind. Lulu didn't see why everyone was so worried. Babies were easy to kill—Saya wouldn't even really have to hunt for them.

Maybe humans thought about these things differently.

"I will kill Diva before that happens." Saya sat up on the sofa and grasped the handle of her katana tightly with both hands.



"We need a plan, and for that, we need our fearless leader back in action. Shouldn't David be out of the hospital by now?"

David, injured at that battle at the base the previous week, was now being cared for at a New York City hospital.

"He's not staying there to get out of work, is he?" Louis joked.

"No." Julia took off her glasses. "David was . . . badly injured. He'll be out of commission for another few weeks, at least."

With that, Julia turned towards the windowsill, only to find herself face to face with Lulu.

Lulu stared unabashedly back at Julia's surprised face.

"Wha—?"

Julia seemed at a loss for words. Lulu smiled to try to ease the tension.

"Hi, there . . ."

Julia wasn't sure what to make of Lulu's visit.

She was a Chiropteran dropping in on a Red Shield safe house, and no one—not even Kai—seemed to see it as anything out of the ordinary. Sitting on the couch next to Saya, Lulu looked more like a neighborhood kid who had come over to play than like humanity's most deadly predator, a Chiropteran.

"So you're from 'Okinawa'?" Lulu sounded the word out carefully.

"Yes."

"What's it like?"

Saya paused. "The sun is bright, and there is ocean everywhere you look."

Lulu looked at the television screen with admiration.

It was set to CNN. The announcer was saying something about the commander of the U.S. Navy's seventh-fleet nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. He was surrounded by a fence of anti-war demonstrators, but Lulu was more interested in the blue sky and the seemingly transparent beach.

"Kilbed, the place where I was born, only has rocks and lots of ice. And it was very cold and always dark." She added, almost as an afterthought, "... We Schiff aren't big fans of the sunlight."

"I see."

The Saya responding so politely to Lulu's rambling seemed like a completely different person than the warrior on the battlefield.

"Say, where were you born, Hagi?"

"Where was I born?" The Chevalier seemed befuddled to have suddenly become the focus of Lulu's curiosity.

"Wait! Don't tell me! I want to guess... A castle?" She paused sheepishly and added, "If you don't mind my asking..."

"No, Lulu. My parents were... nomads. I don't really remember them."

"Wow!" Lulu scrutinized the young man's face for a long moment, then, without warning, jumped from the couch to the floor in front of the television. The commercials were over and the screen lit up in color. It was a children's cartoon. This was the reason Lulu came every week at this time.

"We hadn't told you about her, Julia. Lulu is a Schiff."

"Schiff?" Julia looked over at the girl.

"They aren't enemies anymore." Kai made the point clearly as he approached the table where Louis and Julia were still talking.

His tone was still wary. Julia hadn't been back with them for long, and Kai had every reason to be careful.

It was hard to imagine that her reasons for leaving Red Shield had been altruistic ones. Her greatest mistake had been her admiration for Collins, but she had also been blinded by her enthusiasm as a researcher.

And despite her humanitarian goals, she had cooperated in the development of D67, then watched as it was administered to innocent people. This was a fact Kai had a hard time letting go.

Julia could probably tell how he felt about her. She had never tried to make excuses for what she had done, and she seemed to understand that it was her actions and attitude from now on that would determine whether she would ever again be a full-fledged member of Red Shield.

"I didn't think she was an enemy. I was just surprised that any of them are . . . still alive." Kai could see the compassion in Julia's eyes as she looked at Lulu, then continued, "From what I understand, the Schiff were essentially created to be synthetic Chevaliers. They have the incredibly tough bodies and powers of Chiropterans, but they turned out to be . . . defective . . . in other ways. They're not immortal."

"..."

Kai squeezed his fingers into a fist. He wanted to punch the table, but he restrained himself as he looked at Lulu lying on

the floor, swept up in the fantasy of her cartoon. He couldn't interrupt her special time.

The Schiff were living people. It didn't matter how they had been born, only that they had lived until now, and they needed to find a way to stay alive. As far as Kai—and Saya—were concerned, that was all that mattered.

He didn't want to hear Julia call Lulu and her siblings "defective."

"Anshel then used the same technology to create the Corpse Corps. They're identical to the Schiff, except in one significant way: in the Corpse Corps, Anshel has found a way to control the emergence of the Thorn."

". . . Wait a sec." Kai cut Julia off. This didn't add up to him.

"Do you mean the Thorn is preventable?"

"Yes, theoretically—but only if we have access to Diva's blood."

"Could Saya's work?"

"I can't say . . . I would need some time."

Julia's tone was cool. She wasn't going to jump on board an unlikely and fleeting wish. And the unpredictability of the Schiff's lifespans meant that by the time she'd found the answer, it might be too late.

But despite all of that, the fact that there was even a chance meant everything to Kai. Moses's wish to live a full life wasn't completely futile. This had been Aurélien's dream, too, and he could still feel the heat from the tears that had fallen from her eyes to his chest.

If what Julia had said could be true, then the Schiff might not be doomed after all. Suddenly, their mission was about not only

revenge against Diva, but also honoring Aurélien's memory by extending her brothers and sisters' lives.

". . . I'll be right back." Kai stood up, still wrapped in his thoughts.

"Are you going out on a delivery?"

"Yeah." Kai responded coolly to Louis's attempt at a joke as he headed into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and packed a few dozen transfusion packets of blood into a metal cooler.

New York was known as the city that never sleeps.

No matter where you went, no matter what time it was, people were around. In this case, the people in question were strongly accented Americans under the influence of alcohol and inhaled drugs that seemed to lead to mouth-to-mouth intimacies, and eventually the reproductive act.

From Moses's perspective, the humans of this country seemed very different from those in Europe. The amount of wealth and information they had at their fingertips made them complacent. In France or England, even the young and the poor he saw still had a sense of hopefulness. However, in this country, even the very well-off seemed to have succumbed to despair.

Moses waited on the stone steps of the museum, hidden in a shadow. His heavy coat looked more appropriate for lurking around at night than for meeting someone on the museum steps at midday. Kai chuckled as he walked up.

"Delivery."

"Thank you, as always . . ." Moses's hood muffled his words as Kai passed him the cooler.

"It's fine. Saya and Hagi and everybody are doing what they can."

With this, the Schiff could live without attacking humans. In London they were able to stave off their hunger by eating Chiropterans, but there were no such spoils in New York. They had stolen blood from local hospitals, but that was a dangerous and reckless way to go, and so Kai had offered to provide them with blood until they could find a better way.

Once, the Schiff would have thought nothing of feeding directly from humans, but that time was past. They had survived their time of strife with mankind and together had found the means for a more tranquil coexistence.

Moses looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, "Is Lulu there today, too?"

"Yeah. She's glued to the TV. She must think you guys still haven't caught on." Kai smiled as he spoke.

Carmen and Moses had been suspicious of Lulu's frequent secret trips outside. They were afraid that she was a burden for Kai and the others, but hadn't called her on it.

"None of us have forgotten what you have done for us in the past. Right now, we are trying to live every day as if it is our last. I hope you can forgive her intrusion."

"Seriously, it's not a problem." Kai shook his head, trying to explain. "And . . . you don't have anything to apologize for. Saya agrees—with Lulu around . . . well, it's like being able to talk with Riku again."

Moses knew Riku had been a Chevalier who had been killed by Diva. Just as the Schiff had lost their siblings, a beloved family member had been taken away from Saya. If that reciprocal relationship helped soften the blow from both losses, then it should be cherished.

The degree of mutual understanding they had achieved was also thanks to Kai. He had taken in Aurélien, and if he hadn't pushed both groups to set aside their rivalry, there was little doubt that the last of the Schiff would already have died in vain.

"... Kai Miyagusuku. My humble thanks."

"Why, all of a sudden?"

Moses looked directly into Kai's eyes and grimaced as he spoke directly to him.

"If there had been a human like you at Kilbed, our lives would have probably been very different. If I am born again into this world . . . I hope it is somewhere near you."

Moses wasn't sure he even believed in reincarnation, but that didn't stop him from dreaming. If he really could have another life, he wanted the chance to be close friends with this young human.

"... What are you talking about . . . ?" Kai surprised Moses by grabbing his shoulders. His cheeks were tight and his eyes looked angry. For some reason his fragile human strength felt very powerful right then.

"Your next life? Listen, you are alive right now. You are here with me, aren't you? We are talking, the two of us, right?"

Moses realized that Kai wasn't angry. Kai was trying to keep him from resigning himself to death.

"It isn't too late, you know." Kai half laughed as he said it, and Moses smiled back.

"Our lifespan is limited . . . so therefore we have to do the most we can in the time we are given."

A friendship with Kai . . . a life free of conflict . . . Moses had no greater wish. Surely Carmen and Lulu would not choose to fight if they didn't have to.

But there was to be no peace, at least not in this life. The memories of his dead siblings and his own inevitable end forced Moses toward a single goal: Diva's death.

"If we hear anything about Diva, I'll let you know."

Moses turned to leave, but Kai called after him. "Wait a sec. There's something I need to tell you—something that might help."

Vague as it was, Julia's news seemed as fantastic as a dream.

The air stirred.

Carmen was waiting in a shadow with his back to the wall next to a staircase when he sensed the movement and opened his eyes.

He had not been asleep—the Schiff didn't sleep. He was simply resting.

It was almost daybreak. The light coming in through the holes in the wall and the gaps in the boarded-up windows was stronger than the glow from the moon. The dust-covered floor grew brighter.

"Where were you?"

At the quiet question, the tiny figure that had been doing its best to sneak in unheard stopped in its tracks. Lulu looked up



with a guilty look on her face and pulled her lips into a frown.

"... What difference does it make?"

"Were you with the humans?"

"No."

"I can smell them on you."

Looking confused, Lulu brought her collar and sleeves to her nose, and her nostrils wiggled as she sniffed them. "Does it really smell that much . . . ?"

"So you were there, weren't you?"

"Yes . . ." She couldn't evade him for long, so she switched to a new defense. "But they are really nice to me, and it's fun to watch television. Next time you should come, too, Carmen—" Lulu's torrent of words was cut short as Carmen's pike skimmed past her face and lodged in the wall.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Do not go back to the humans again. They are different from us."

"But they play with me . . . and I can talk to them."

Carmen didn't doubt that members of the group calling themselves Red Shield might be more hospitable than the humans they dealt with at Kilbed. But the Schiff and humans were too different, especially now that there were so few of the Schiff still alive.

"They don't succumb to the Thorn."

*The sudden, inevitable death . . .* The only ones who knew it firsthand were the Schiff, Carmen's brothers and sisters. They cooperated with the humans because they shared the same goal of overthrowing Diva, but in the end, they could never be true comrades.

"But . . ."

Lulu screwed her face up in frustration. She didn't want to give up her human friends. She decided to try a different approach.

Lulu suddenly looked up at Carmen, and her eyes sparkled.

". . . Hey, Carmen, do you know the place Okinawa?"

"Okinawa?"

"It's a really nice place, I hear. There's an ocean, and lots of sunlight, and it's beautiful."

Lulu's words bounced out of her mouth as if she were already planning their trip.

"Kai and Saya said that when this is all over, they're going to go back home there. We could go with them too . . ."

"How in the world would we do that?" Carmen shouted in indignation.

Lulu stood in silent shock.

"Crazy dreams like that will only fall through—or get us killed. Why can't you see that?"

"Carmen. Enough." The quiet rebuke came from Moses.

The third Schiff appeared in the abandoned warehouse as if he had drifted in with the morning mist. Carmen took a long look over his glasses at the cooler Moses carried in his arms.

"You, too. Did you go and meet with that kid, Kai?"

"Kai is a human we can trust." Moses's tone was more assertive than usual. Meeting with the human had solidified his trust in him.

Carmen's antipathy toward Kai was tinged with jealousy. He didn't like that human disrupting the tight circle of the three surviving Schiff . . .

He couldn't bring himself to hate Kai. Kai had believed in Aurélien, and he never looked down on the Schiff. He saw them as equals. He had practically saved their lives at the battle on Christina Island. As Moses stated, he was a human they could trust.

But Carmen couldn't quite bring himself to do that, either.

"Humans are nothing more than our food source."

"I believe we can live in peace with them."

Moses opened the cooler and pulled out a bag of blood. He gave it to Lulu and then held out a second one to Carmen.

"I don't need charity from humans! I can find my own food!"

"Carmen," Moses's voice was gentle but firm.

"And not all humans are like him, are they?"

Thinking of the treatment they received in Kilbed, Carmen could not find the tolerance Moses and Lulu displayed. Even if he believed in Kai, that didn't mean other humans were trustworthy. After getting something, it was hard losing it again—worse than if you'd never had it at all. And the bigger it was, the harder the loss would be.

Carmen had seen his beloved siblings die in front of his eyes more times than he wanted to remember. Even the memories tore him up inside. He had enough pain, and didn't need any more.

A heavy silence filled the air of the deserted house.

Lulu sucked the blood from the plastic pack with a straw until she built the courage to say something.

"Say, I've been thinking about this lately . . . What if we aren't going to die . . . ?"

Carmen's body shook as he turned toward her. ". . . What did you say?"

Lulu didn't seem to notice the wrath in Carmen's voice.

"I was thinking maybe the Thorn won't ever come."

"Don't be an imbecile!" Before he was conscious of having moved, Carmen had lifted her off the floor by the front of her cloak.

His hood had fallen back, and his voice trembled as he shook her. "How can you even joke about that? What about Aurélien . . . and what about all our other brothers and sisters who are dead?!"

"Carmen . . ." It was Moses's voice, full of shock and sorrow.

Lulu stared at him, her eyes wide and wary.

He felt their gazes and his cheeks quivered as they stared at what his hood had previously hidden: the jagged line of red crystal running down the side of his neck.

"Oh, no . . ."

Lulu's eyes trembled with regret and pity. Carmen couldn't allow her to look at him like that and he dropped her tiny body to the floor.

Carmen's gaze met Moses's. He couldn't allow his comrades to see him like this—weakened and dying. Carmen pushed his brother's hand away and walked to the pike leaning against the wall.

"Wait!" Lulu's cry struck him in the back.

Moses stood in silence.

Leaving his fractured family behind, Carmen leapt from the building and fled blindly into the night.

He felt like a beast running over a metal-and-glass-leafed forest of steel girders and concrete. When Carmen finally paused to catch his breath, it was morning, and he was on a side street. He watched the houses brighten under the rising sun. He

had never seen the city under the light of day. The Schiff were creatures of the night; sunlight burned their skin.

Carmen had never felt the warmth of the sun.

He removed the hood covering his head and walked into one of the weaker patches of light, feeling his skin begin to smolder. However, that didn't discourage Carmen, who continued aimlessly down the sidewalk.

In this neighborhood there was no one to notice him. But even if he had been walking down Wall Street with crowds of people, he probably wouldn't have cared.

Separated from his comrades, where could he even go?

Carmen had no answers. All he knew was that he was too scared to simply sit and wait to die.

*Ghee . . . Aurélien . . . How did you withstand the fear?*

*Gudrif . . . Dars . . . How were you able to stay strong and show such bravery even as you knew death had inhabited your bodies?*

More than anyone in the group, Carmen liked to fight at the front.

The humans from Kilbed, Diva's Chevaliers, Saya and her Chevalier, the members of Red Shield, the Corpse Corps . . . every enemy he had crossed blades with, he had attacked with the same furious passion.

He had fought to protect himself and his siblings. He never fought out of fear. He had taken pride in destroying his enemies.

Had his passion for battle been nothing but a front? Immersing himself in battle had allowed Carmen to forget his fears. Now, for the first time, he knew what the Thorn truly meant. He knew how truly fragile his existence was . . .

"Aurélien . . ."

*I am scared. Dying is more frightening than I imagined.*

*Will my life mean nothing after I disappear? My soul? My fear? I don't even know what it means to be alive.*

*It's getting hard to breathe.*

*My body is drying up.*

*I haven't had anything to eat in a long time. I don't feel like I am starving to death, but I am growing weak. But what is that? Am I really hungry—or is it because I'm dying?*

Carmen looked up to see he was standing before a white building.

The big red cross on the front told him that it was a hospital. He hadn't realized how hungry he was—he must have followed the smell of blood.

Carmen pushed off the ground and leapt through a third-floor window, knocking shards of glass to the linoleum floor. Then, he turned in reaction to a different sound.

"Who—who are you . . . ?" The trembling nurse dropped the tray of surgical implements on the floor.

Carmen had planned on taking blood from transfusion storage, but didn't mind getting his nourishment another way.

He knew the others might hate him for this, but what difference would it make after he was dead? Did he still really need to practice restraint for those still among the living?

Carmen's vision began to waver, and he reached for the nurse, extending his right arm. He felt the bones in his hand shift, and from between his middle and ring fingers emerged a red javelin.

Witnessing the change, the nurse's face contorted in horror.

Carmen was about to bite into her neck, but he hesitated when he sensed a presence at his back.

He knew without looking it was Schiff.

He turned around and saw them, surrounded by a bright light.

*My family . . . is here.*

"... Aurélien!"

Standing at the end of the hallway, Carmen could make out her faint smile.

Ghee was smiling, too. The brother-sister duo of Dismas and Gestas, Yan, Gudrif and Dars.

"You're all here . . ."

They glowed golden, and they looked so happy.

Carmen slowly began to walk toward them. The Schiff didn't have the ability to shed tears, but Carmen cried all the same. Invisible tears of joy rolled down his cheeks.

Both Aurélien and Ghee and . . . everyone looked strong and healthy again.

And they were smiling at him.

Carmen remembered.

After their escape from Kilbed, there had been times on their rough journey when they had laughed together. Not many, but it had happened.

Carmen felt them now, without a doubt.

"You've all been *here* the whole time . . ." Carmen pressed a hand to his chest and smiled.

Before him, there was nothing but a skylight, and, just beyond that, a clothesline from which several sheets flapped in the wind.





The bright light in the dark hallway had tricked his eyes, made him hallucinate for a second—no, it couldn't be.

Carmen knew that somehow, his brothers and sisters still lived.

Lulu had run after Carmen, but Moses didn't move from the deserted warehouse.

He believed Carmen would come back.

And yet, he couldn't calm his emotions. The Thorn had now made its way into Carmen's body. No matter what they did, the Schiff were not meant to survive in this world.

According to Kai, if they could get ahold of Diva's blood there was a chance they could eventually cure the Thorn. But Carmen no longer had the time to wait for that to happen.

*Those born without hope cannot forgive those that brought them into this world . . .*

Moses sat down on the stairs and curled his fingers into tight fists. It was then that he felt something.

*Outside.*

Standing before the entrance to avoid the morning light, Moses could see a figure standing on the roof, in the shadow of the building next door. It was Carmen.

"Carmen . . . Come inside."

As the sun moved overhead, the shadow would disappear. If that happened, Carmen's skin would peel and his flesh would burn. Direct sunlight would destroy a Schiff's body faster than it could regenerate. In his weakened state, Carmen would probably burn up as if he had been hit by a nuclear blast.

And the hood of his robes was down. Even sitting in the shadow should have been agonizing.

With his back still to Moses, Carmen looked toward the ocean.

A white bird crossed the cloudless sky.

"I saw Aurélien." As he spoke, Carmen's voice was as clear as the sky. "It wasn't only her. Ghee, too. Everybody."

Carmen's face looked relaxed and his forehead was no longer lined with worry. Moses knew the weight of the burden Carmen carried into his fighting.

"They were all inside me. Inside my memories . . ." Carmen looked at Moses. He was smiling.

The frank and docile look of innocence on Carmen's face was something Moses had never seen before. The fissures had spread from his neck into his cheeks and forehead.

"Hey, Moses."

Carmen called his name, but Moses couldn't answer.

He understood Carmen's change in personality was because he had accepted his own demise.

"I knew I was scared of dying, but I didn't know why."

"The sun is rising, Carmen. Come back inside."

Moses's warning was quiet, and Carmen didn't seem to hear.

"I thought maybe it was that I hadn't really . . . accomplished anything. But that isn't really it. It's like Aurélien said—what I'm really scared of is being forgotten."

Carmen looked back toward the sparkling ocean as he spoke.

"But I realized something. Everyone is still alive . . . Inside me, everyone is still alive, in my memory."

Carmen held his hand to his heart.

"I'm glad . . . You and Lulu will still be here to remember me."

The shadow of the building shrank as the sun rose higher in the sky. Any moment, the sunshine would touch Carmen's boots as he sat on the concrete roof.

"Carmen . . . come inside! Hurry!"

"You won't forget about me, will you?"

"Carmen . . ."

"I am honored to have known you."

Moses didn't want to hear that kind of talk. The satisfied look on Carmen's smiling face made Moses's chest ache.

Carmen was choosing to die in the sunlight before he was killed by the Thorn.

". . . No!" Moses cried out and jumped into the light.

Even through his hood and robe, Moses's entire body felt like it was on fire. Ignoring the pain, he landed at Carmen's side and sheltered Carmen's body with his own.

"I won't let you die! I'll find a way—I can't let you become just a memory!"

Moses dragged Carmen indoors, stumbling in the unforgiving glare of the sun.

He laid Carmen's body down into a cool place in the back and closed the door to keep out the light. As he knelt down next to Carmen, Moses felt the presence of someone else in the room. He sprang to his feet and leaped for his scythe.

"Chevalier!" Moses's voice seethed with hatred.

"Schiff—do you want to help your brother?" The man they had slaughtered on Christina Island was standing before him.

James Ironside. They had faced him more than once on the other side of the Atlantic. From the top of the stairs, his face looked stoic and fearless as he surveyed the room. He was dressed not in the U.S. Navy uniform that had been his second skin, but in a very expensive-looking suit.

Allowing a Chevalier to invade their hideout during the day was a major blunder. Not only was there an enemy before them, but the building they were in was surrounded by an even more dangerous predator: sunlight.

They were cornered.

However, Moses kept his focus and leapt forward. In order to protect Carmen, he needed to kill this man.

He swung his scythe just as he landed.

James's legs didn't move a muscle.

Bright sparks lit up in the dim room.

"What . . . ?"

To protect his neck, James had thrown up his right arm and blocked Moses's blade with a red spike that had emerged from the palm of his hand.

Taking advantage of Moses's confusion, James brushed him aside. Moses went spinning into the air and crashed into the wall, landing on his side.

The red flash from the Chevalier's hand grazed his cheek before burying itself into a pillar behind him. But it wasn't the dust that came pouring from the shaking ceiling that caught Moses's attention.

The stake was formed of crystallized blood and had been fired by tight tendons. Among Chiropterans, only the Schiff were supposed to possess that ability.

"It's the first time I actually tried using it. Not bad." James smiled as he looked at his own right hand.

"How can you . . . ?"

"Are you asking how a Chiropteran who came in contact with Saya's blood still lives? Or are you asking how I can use tricks from your arsenal?" As James spoke, he removed his suit jacket and undid his necktie.

"Regardless, the answer is the same."

The Chiropteran body that began to appear as he unbuttoned his clean white shirt looked extremely strange.

His flesh was split at the chest. The top was black and the bottom and limbs white . . . It looked like his body had been cobbled together with parts of other people's.

"Our Chevalier bodies and your Schiff bodies were both born from Diva. But I borrowed some pieces from the improved Corpse Corps, and I have something you do not: eternal life."

". . ."

Moses understood now how James had survived. However, he was determined to send this Chevalier on a return trip to hell.

Moses crouched and was about to attack again, but James's words stopped him short. "You Schiff are dying off one by one from the Thorn . . . If you want, I can get you what you need to cure it."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I am still alive." James proudly spread his arms wide.

The very fact that he was alive and well after receiving what should have been the deadliest of blows spoke more than words.

But Moses was a Schiff, and the Schiff, too, were proud.

"We don't need charity from Diva's lapdogs! We'll kill Diva and take her blood ourselves."

"I see. So you have put your faith in Red Shield. Yet, even if they could beat Diva, why would they then invest their energy into finding a cure for your Thorn? And even if they did, how long do you think it would take? Look at your friend there. Do you think he'll be around by the time they're done?"

Moses grit his teeth.

"Don't listen to him, Moses! He's talking garbage!" Carmen shouted, struggling to sit up.

James snorted. "Pride cannot eliminate the Thorn. If you want to call us Diva's lapdogs, then feel free. But you will still die the meaningless deaths of stray dogs."

James was right. If Moses's life had been the only one at stake, he could have brushed aside James's sweet talk with ease. But he had Carmen and Lulu to consider. And Carmen didn't have much time.

At the very least, if he could help them . . .

Moses lowered his scythe.

James nodded his approval. "We shouldn't be fighting. We are family, born of the same blood. We should be able to understand each other."

His condescending tone made Moses want to vomit.

*Understand each other?*

True understanding only came when you were truly close with someone—like they were with Kai.

". . . What do you want from us?" Quashing his anger and hatred, Moses kept his voice cold.

"Moses . . ."

Moses turned away from the look of horror on Carmen's face and glared at the Chevalier at the top of the stairs. James chuckled quietly.

"Indeed. There is one thing we'd like you to do."

Lulu burst in through the apartment window, startling Kai.

"Carmen's gone! We have to find him!" Lulu cried, burying her face in Saya's chest. Her voice was desperate and fierce.

Once she'd calmed down enough to explain the situation, Kai did not hesitate to go out and search for the hiding Carmen. Daytime in the city would be deadly for a Schiff. Kai remembered how fearful Aurélien had been of the sunlight in Paris.

"It's day out. You should wait here."

Kai left Lulu with Louis and ventured out into New York as the sun cracked the horizon. The rest of them would split up to search Manhattan and the surrounding areas. Because Carmen would likely need medical attention and Julia didn't know what he looked like, she would wait at the apartment and prepare a blood transfusion.

Kai thought about the situation as he walked down Fifth Avenue.

What had made Carmen run from his comrades?

Nobody cared more for his siblings than he did, so there couldn't have been a simple reason for his actions.

Kai realized that, of all the Schiff, he had probably spoken to Carmen the least.

Aurélien had said Kai and Carmen were alike. Kai didn't think they had much in common, but he had recognized how much Carmen loved his little sister. It was the same way that Kai loved Saya.

Kai remembered how Carmen had shaken with anger when Aurélien had died, and how he had cursed their fate.

When Kai had lost George and Riku, he had felt that same pain in his heart. And whenever Saya was hurt in battle, he could feel the pain and anger welling up.

Maybe he and Carmen did have a lot in common.

He thought of Aurélien and the other Schiff who had died; of Moses and Lulu; of how their fight had started; and finally of their uncertain future . . .

Kai had made friends with Moses; maybe he could reach out to Carmen, too. But to do that, Kai needed to find him before the sun sucked his life away.

Kai lost track of time. By the time he noticed how far the sun had moved in its course, it was already close to noon.

The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians and the main streets were jammed. As Kai ran towards the Bronx he realized where he was and stopped in his tracks. He stood in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There were an amazing number of visitors going in and out, even on a weekday morning.

Only a few hours earlier, Kai had met Moses on this very spot. He had told Moses what they had learned from Julia, and Moses's usually composed face had looked stricken. He hadn't known how to react to the possibility that suddenly faced him. It showed how deeply he had resigned himself to his own death.



Kai's eyes were drawn away from the tourists heading in and out of the ornate entryway, to the alley at the side, where a lone figure lurked. He was dressed in dark robes, and a thick hood covered his face.

"Carmen . . . ?" Kai walked several paces toward the figure before he realized his mistake. The Schiff in the alley was more slender than Carmen, and the mouth Kai could see under the hood was softer.

"Moses, what are you doing out here in the day?"

Kai raised his voice as he ran toward the alley. The roof of the adjoining building cast a partial shadow, but one step out of the alleyway would expose Moses to the early summer sunlight.

"I know you are worried about Carmen, but we can—"

Moses looked up. The expression in his eyes stopped Kai in his tracks.

They were the eyes of a dead man—or one who had sold his soul.

From under the robes emerged a large silver blade.

Goose bumps ran across Kai's body. Moses intended to kill him.

Before his mind had fully processed the situation, Kai dodged to the side, pressing his body against the building wall. Moses stepped in, swinging his scythe horizontally, and missed Kai by a hair's breadth.

"Moses . . . ?"

Kai turned around to see Moses right in front of him, with his scythe raised above his head.

The blade came down at a diagonal angle and bit into the wall, catching on an iron pipe. Kai took that reprieve to roll across the ground and put distance between the two of them.

"Moses! Why?"

There was no doubt. He was definitely trying to kill Kai. But *why*?

"... You don't need to know." Moses's refusal crackled like the voice of an elderly man.

He pulled the blade out from the wall sluggishly, but it wasn't out of hesitation. He seemed to have lost some of his supernatural speed and strength. Otherwise, his blade would have cut through the brick wall and iron piping like butter—and through Kai, as well.

"Do you really think this is what Aurélien would have wanted?"

"Aurélien is dead." Moses spoke in a cold monotone. "I am still alive. And this is something I must do."

"Kill me? Your friend?"

"... Yes." Moses affirmed Kai's fear through pale lips.

Kai doubted there was any way to dissuade Moses. He was not the kind of person who would engage in such an act without careful consideration. Something big was behind this, especially if Moses felt he had to hide his reason. As obvious as it was that he hated to betray his friend, it was just as clear that Moses was convinced that it was something he had to do.

"I have no choice . . . Please, Kai."

Moses's face, which had been frozen like an ice sculpture, suddenly crumpled. He looked like a sobbing child. If Schiff could cry, his cheeks would have been wet with tears.

He slowly raised his blade up, and it flashed in the sunlight.

"Aagh!" The light flared off the blade, burning Moses's face and sending him reeling backwards.

It gave Kai the window he needed. This was not an opponent he could beat in a straight fight—even if he had wanted to fight him.

He sprinted as fast as he could back to the sidewalk and into traffic.

A yellow taxicab slammed on its brakes and honked its horn while another car slammed into the rear of a truck, eliciting shouts from both drivers. Kai darted between cars, dodging his way across the busy street.

He headed straight for Central Park. Businessmen on their lunch breaks and clusters of runners in sleeveless shirts passed him as Kai entered the park.

Carmen was on his knees on the floor, breathing in rough gasps.

His lungs felt like they were on fire. The Thorn was spreading rapidly, weakening him as it did.

"Moses . . . you bastard."

Staring at the door Moses had left through, Carmen struggled to stand.

He needed to follow after Moses, to stop him. But Carmen's arms and legs weren't listening to him. Just as he had seen happen to Aurélien and Ghee in the final stages of the Thorn, his body was being destroyed from the inside out. Even the blood pumping through his veins felt sluggish as he neared death.

"You are not satisfied with his choice?" The Chevalier leaning against the wall laughed as he asked the question. "He accepted our conditions in order to help you. Shouldn't you be more grateful?"

"Shut your mouth . . . !"

Moses had been foolish.

He had finally made a real friend, one who wasn't a Schiff, and now he was going to throw all of it away.

James said he would cure the Thorn in exchange for Kai's life. It would have made sense for him to ask for Saya, but why would a Chevalier ask for a mere human to be killed? That part just didn't connect. But there was one thing Carmen knew for certain.

Moses couldn't be allowed to go through with it.

A fiery cough tore through Carmen's throat as he struggled to his feet.

James raised an eyebrow.

"Good luck. But where is it you are going? Isn't it . . . dangerous for you to go out during the day?"

James's right hand lashed out.

The punch smashed through the window beside him, sending the broken shutter and glass flying outside.

The sunlight streamed through the opening, and Carmen fell to the ground and rolled away to avoid its deadly touch.

"Damn you!"

"Even now, he is trying to kill Kai Miyagusuku. Or perhaps he has already done it."

James quickly moved along the wall and tore the shutter from the next window.

"But even if you had gotten Diva's blood, it wouldn't have stopped your death . . ."

The sunlight from the third window James opened hit Carmen in the face.

Carmen pulled his hood over his face and turned his body the other way.

"Why . . . have you followed us this far just to persecute us?"

"... Despair."

The fourth window opened as James crushed the shutter like old balsa wood between his fingers.

With the light of the world at his back, James opened his mouth and laughed. It was the fractured, distorted laugh of an enemy who scarcely resembled the cool-headed officer James had once been.

"Your very existence disgusts me. Fraught with imperfections, filled with tainted blood, your ugly and broken bodies have kept me away from the one I love . . . Your very existence brought me despair . . . Because of your kind, Mama would have cast me aside for that *human* . . ."

Carmen heard the sound of James's footsteps, and another shutter was torn open.

The whole room was striped with wide columns of light. Carmen shrank back into a corner.

But Carmen wasn't simply trying to escape the light. He had chosen his refuge for another reason. Moses had left the cooler of blood there the night before. Kai's meddling might have given Carmen one final chance.

The clasp on the cooler was open. Carmen lifted the lid and grabbed a vinyl bag of blood with both hands. He tore it open with his fangs and drank voraciously.

"The last supper?" James mocked him, but he was looking at Carmen with narrowed eyes, and he leapt into the air just in time

to dodge the crimson javelin that shot from Carmen's right hand, grazed his leather boots, and sunk into the wall.

Carmen could feel strength returning to his body. He could still fight. He was far from perfect, but he had to do something.

Carmen ran forward, hugging the wall to avoid the light.

"Where are you going?" He heard James's voice close to his ear.

At that moment, Carmen extended his right arm. There, stuck in the ground, stood the pike he had used to threaten Lulu the night before. He closed his hand around the pole and used it like a fulcrum to swing his body around.

As James paused, confused, Carmen spun the rest of the way around the pike and drove his knees into the Chevalier's back, crushing his spine. James's head whipped back as his body flew forward, and he crashed into the wall and turned, only to face the triple blades of Carmen's pike.

Carmen had landed with both feet on the ground, wrenching the pike out of the floor at the same time, and sent it sailing toward James's chest.

But wounded as he was, James still easily avoided the pike, shifting swiftly out of its path.

"Get out of my way!" Carmen leapt after the pike. The sunlight tore across his body as he punched James in the face with all the power his body could muster.

The blow sent James's body smashing through the wall. Carmen reached through the rising clouds of dust and debris to grab his pike from midair and kicked off the concrete floor.

He had bought the few seconds he needed. By the time James had regained his footing, Carmen had already leapt from the bay window into the street.

*I have to reach him in time . . .*

Ignoring everything else, Carmen focused on finding Moses's scent as his skin burned like a demon's in the midday sun.

Louis had answered the phone, and even he had a hard time grasping the situation.

"Moses? Attacking you?"

Kai understood Louis's confusion. If he hadn't been there, he wouldn't have believed it himself.

"I don't know the reason. He isn't the type to do something like that."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

Kai stood up from the wooden bench and looked out over the park.

There was no shelter here, so the sun shone down full force. For the Schiff it would have felt like a blast furnace. But if it hadn't been daytime, or such a clear day . . . The very thought made Kai's chest grow cold.

"Saya is in East Harlem. I will send her your way. Wait there for the time being."

"All right. I'll do some sunbathing while I wait for her."

Kai pressed a button on his cell phone to end the call and looked up into the blue sky with a sigh.

Suddenly, he leapt from the bench and threw himself to the ground as a silver flash split the bench in two.

The curved blade sliced through the iron frame of the bench, then arched back up into the air before coming down once again at Kai's head.

Kai rolled out of the way of the attack, then bolted to a nearby stand of trees.

A black shadow stood in the grass in the bright, midday sun. His shoulders were hunched up, and he swung a sickle like Death. The dark face under the hood slowly turned toward Kai.

Moses came walking toward him, one careful step at a time.

Kai's instincts told him he needed to escape. This was a deadly situation.

However, what he saw in Moses's eyes urged Kai in the other direction. He had to find some way to help him.

During that moment of hesitation the sickle swung through the air.

Kai leaned over as the blade came close enough to clip a few strands of hair before slicing deep into a cedar tree's trunk. Had Moses been at his full strength, the blow would surely have felled the tree.

Moses wrenched the blade from the tree and repositioned the weapon in his hands, bowing slightly under the weight of the heavy scythe.

"Don't come any closer . . ." Kai pulled out his pistol and pointed the muzzle at Moses, who was staggering towards him.

He had never imagined since reconciling with the Schiff that he could be aiming his pistol at one . . . but Kai was not ready to



die just yet. He had promised Riku and George that he would see Saya through her own fight, and he didn't intend to break his word.

"I won't stop." Moses continued to close in on him.

"... Forgive me," Kai whispered, and pulled the trigger.

For Chiropterans, guns were not a real threat. Even a bullet to the brain was far from fatal.

But Kai wasn't aiming at Moses's body.

Moses's hood jumped as the bullet ripped through it, exposing his face to the sun.

"Gyaa . . . !" Moses collapsed to the ground, throwing his gloved hands over his bare face.

Now was Kai's chance to escape. But his feet wouldn't move.

"..."

Kai shrugged off his jacket. Draping it over Moses's head to shield his face, Kai helped the Schiff to his feet. Moses did not resist. Kai guided Moses to the shade under the trees and lay him down gently, then sat down beside him on the ground.

"You can keep the jacket."

"... I came here to kill you." Moses raised his body up and looked at Kai from under the jacket with exhausted eyes.

"Stay still. Your face was pretty badly burned."

"I don't need your sympathy." Moses turned away from Kai. "You told Aurélien that humans could share. But some things cannot be shared. Sometimes, for someone to live, someone has to die!"

The pain in Moses's cry went beyond that of his seared skin.

"... That was why you tried to kill me?"

Moses nodded his head.

"Some problems . . . can't be solved by words alone."

Kai could see the conviction in Moses's face. Not even this battle could completely sever the bond of their friendship. No wonder Moses was in such pain.

"Are you that desperate to survive . . . ?" Kai asked the question quietly, without condemnation.

Kai knew he, too, would die someday. Unless he fell in battle, that was decades into the future—and either way, it was nothing he could predict or prevent. But it was different for Moses and the other Schiff, who lived under the weight of their fate.

Kai couldn't imagine the resentment they felt, and he couldn't blame them for breaking out of their prison or the actions they had taken since—not even for trying to kill him.

Moses dug the fingers of both hands into the dirt.

"He said they were all alive inside him! He said he wanted everyone to remember him . . . !" Moses sobbed as the last of his façade crumbled. "He stayed strong in front of the others, and never showed them his true self! If I die, who will remember him? What will it even matter that he lived? What will we leave behind?"

Moses's knees trembled and he rose unsteadily to his feet.

"They need more time . . . to find someone else who can know them and remember them, besides me . . ."

Moses leaned against his sickle for support.

Kai reached out towards him. "Moses . . ."

"Kai . . . if only we had met sooner, we could have maybe been better friends . . . The others, too."

His eyes smiled as if he were looking into a dream, yet still sparkled with guilt and pain.

"But for their sake, I must kill you!"

Moses could hardly stand, let alone wield the heavy scythe. However, Schiff bodies were weapons in themselves.

Kai stood. He was out of the scythe's reach, but he could see a crimson spearhead emerging from Moses's right palm.

"Forgive me, Kai . . ."

The crimson stake launched from his flesh at point-blank range.

The blood dripping on the ground stained the green grass and seeped into the soil.

"Carmen . . ."

The tall Schiff stood in front of Kai. The spike that had shot from Moses's hand had impaled his shoulder, and blood poured from the open wound.

"Why . . . ?" Moses's lips trembled as the word spilled from his mouth like a convulsion.

Carmen smiled. "I'm glad . . . I got here in time . . ." He spoke softly, and Moses rushed to catch him as he collapsed to the ground.

Trying to support Carmen's body, Moses helped him grasp the stake that had pierced his body with two hands and pulled until it was out, then pressed on the wound, trying in vain to staunch the bleeding.

"Carmen . . . why . . . ?"

"Open your eyes, Moses . . ." Carmen lifted his hand from his chest and stroked his brother's cheek. "You should know better than anyone that we can't create a future like this."

"I knew that . . . ! I should have known that, but . . . I . . ." Moses's face was twisted with sorrow and pain as he lifted his head to meet Carmen's eyes.

"No one . . . lives forever. How we live our lives, and how we greet death . . . that's enough."

Kai realized that Carmen had turned his head and was looking at him.

Carmen was looking at him like a *friend*.

A person who would remember the short lives of the Schiff after they were gone . . .

"Kai."

It may have been the very first time Carmen called him by name.

"What is it?"

"Give this to Lulu."

He pressed the trident into Kai's hand.

"Hey, no, don't talk like—"

"Kai." Carmen gently interrupted his outburst. "Please take care of Lulu."

Moses had helped Carmen to his feet, even though he himself could barely stand. They were both smiling as they leapt away.

". . . Hey!"

Kai reached out to them, but his hand only grasped air.

A sudden breeze stirred the grass, brushing away the vague afterimage that was all that remained of the two Schiff.

Kai looked up. Beyond the tall trees, he saw a flash of light from the roof of a nearby skyscraper. It flared bright for a moment, then faded.

Kai looked again at the sickle and trident on the ground before him.

*I will not forget them.*

He would keep them in his memories, and they would live on within him.

There was still plenty of time before sunset, but the sky was already the color of flame.

Moses stared out from the roof of the building as the sun painted the city gold.

He held Carmen in his arms and could feel his friend's feverish heat. Both their faces had been scorched by the sun. Carmen had already begun to succumb to the Thorn, breaking down from the inside. Moses, too, was burning: though Kai's jacket had shielded Moses's face, a few seconds in the light had been enough, and little by little, his body would die.

Both were in pain, but neither was afraid as they clung to each other on the roof.

Carmen pointed toward the light. "Look. Isn't it amazing? The humans who made us . . . could never have guessed that we'd come so far on our own."

". . . So our lives . . . meant something."

"Yes." Carmen's reply was weak but certain. "We lived and fought and were . . . a family. And Kai . . . will remember us. He will . . . tell our story."

"Yes . . ." Moses nodded and clutched the hem of Kai's jacket.

He had a friend.

And his siblings.

The man-made family shared the same blood. They had found true connections. The value of that could not be measured by

time. One second of happiness could balance a hundred years of misery.

He had lived a life he could be proud of.

"Are you . . . crying?" Carmen smiled.

Moses felt the wet streams on his cheeks and laughed. "Tears? I didn't think we were able to."

"Maybe . . . we aren't so different from humans." Carmen's lips barely moved. The Thorn was spreading quickly. It already covered more than half of his face.

Moses grasped Carmen's hand.

"Let's go together."

"Yes."

They exchanged smiles. Moses removed the jacket covering his head as Carmen pushed back the hood of his robes.

They stepped out into the light.

The brilliant sunset reflected off their faces as their bodies erupted into flame.

*I want to believe in the word I read in the humans' books: "hope."*

Moses remembered his words from when they had left Kilbed.

*I was born and I lived.*

*It was wonderful.*

From inside the flames, Moses's burning lips curled into a smile.

THE KICKED BALL flew in a high arc and bounced into an alley.

The children went chasing after it.

A boy, fourteen or fifteen years old, skillfully trapped the ball and returned, dribbling it between his feet.

His younger brother charged forward, and as he struggled to steal the ball, the teen caught it with his heel, sending it flying back.

The show-off move was a mistake. Other players were already behind him, chasing the ball through the air.

A girl the same age caught the ball with a perfect chest trap. She let it rebound once on the ground and then off her knee. Then, with a well-timed kick, she sent the ball flying over the boys' heads to the younger of the brothers.

Saya sat on the apartment stairs and cheered on the three children chasing after the ball.

It was a scene she hadn't witnessed in a long time.

The two boys and the girl reminded her of her own family, long ago.

Kai and Riku and she—

In the park in front of the restaurant, they would play catch until sundown, and when George called them in for dinner, they would race to the door. It was right when she had joined the Miyagusuku family, before Kai had quit playing baseball.

At some point, Saya noticed Hagi standing to her side.

He didn't want to be in her way, but at the same time didn't like to let her too far out of his sight. He had positioned himself at a distance out of her line of sight, but close enough that he could protect her if the need arose.

Suddenly, Saya spoke. "Hagi, I'm so sorry for everything. You've gone through so much for my sake."

She closed her eyes, then opened them with a start as Hagi took her hand in his. He was kneeling before her at the foot of the stairs.

"Saya, I exist for your sake. I will do whatever you wish." His eyes were wide and sincere.

"All I want now is to defeat Diva—and for you to fulfill that promise."

Hagi's eyes were troubled, trapped in the valley between love and agony.

Saya looked away, back toward the alley.

Even on melting asphalt and scalding concrete under the midsummer sun, the children continued to play.

She was ready for a change in season, as she felt herself slipping further toward the long sleep.

Julia's expertise had helped keep Saya's body running, but the hard truth was every hour that passed, she was losing time.



Would she have enough strength to defeat Diva when she finally faced her? Either way, her journey would finally end.

"I'm sorry, Hagi."

Saya squeezed Hagi's hand and felt his fingers squeeze back.

Mao peered down at Saya and Hagi on the stoop with both elbows on the windowsill, but turned around when she heard the refrigerator door close.

Kai must have just woken up. He had shuffled out of his bedroom, and was running a hand through his unruly hair as he gulped from a water bottle.

"Kai, you overslept." From the sofa next to Louis, Lulu tore her eyes from the cartoon rerun to give Kai her verdict.

"It was too hot last night. I couldn't sleep. It must be nice not having to sleep."

"What does it feel like?"

"Huh? I can't explain it. It feels like . . . sleeping." As Kai stumbled through his reply he returned the water bottle to the fridge.

"Is it like fainting? I did that once."

"Anyway, it's nothing to be proud of . . ." Mao held her cell phone close to Kai's face, pointing at the time. It was nearly noon.

It had been two full weeks since Moses and Carmen had died, and Kai seemed to have closed himself off. He tried to act grown-up and pretend he wasn't hurting, but everyone around him could feel it.

However, Lulu had been affected the most of all. They did all they could to keep her occupied and not left alone, and Kai had put in a valiant effort. It had been his idea to have Lulu move into the apartment, and for her part, Lulu appeared to have embraced Kai in Moses's place as her "oniisan."

The thorny Kai of the old days had confused kindness with weakness, and as a result, he had hurt people he cared about. This Kai was gentler, easier to trust.

That wasn't the problem turning in Mao's mind.

*Compared to Hagi, he'd never stand a chance.*

Mao's eyebrows came together as she watched Kai slouch into the living room. He was dressed in a tank top and sweatpants, and he acted no different than a junior high schooler!

"What?" Sensing her glare, he looked at her dubiously, and she replied with a sigh.

"I guess you're just outmatched."

Hagi was perfect.

Mao had heard of Hagi from the other girls at the school, when they had known him only as the cellist who played on Park Avenue. His good looks and exquisite playing had captivated girls' hearts, but traveling with him all this time, Mao had also come to see that the young man was more than a pretty face.

Saya was everything to Hagi—literally. His life revolved around nothing but her. And in return, she trusted him implicitly, above anyone else.

Mao knew their bond was something stronger than even she could imagine.

Did Kai really have a chance?

After a few moments of thought, Mao spoke again.

"Say, Kai. Do you think you can go do some shopping?"

"Shopping?"

"Yeah. You just saw the inside of the refrigerator, didn't you?"

"Hm . . . Yeah."

Kai seemed to understand. The fresh produce from the beginning of the week was almost gone.

"I won't say who, but there are big eaters living here."

"She's talking about you." Lulu poked Louis in the stomach.

"But why do I have to be the one to go?"

"Buy a week's worth. You want me to carry all that under that blazing sun?"

"There's no winning with you." Kai reluctantly accepted her orders.

Mao chuckled silently to herself.

*One down, one to go.*

After Kai had changed his clothes and left the apartment, Mao waited exactly one minute and then ran down the stairs with a scribbled list.

Saya and Hagi were still on the front steps.

"Did Kai . . . ?"

"He already left."

"I see . . ." Mao dropped her eyes as if this were an unfortunate turn of events, but then took Saya's hand with a smile.

"I know! Otonashi, can I ask you a favor?"

"Me? Sure, but . . ." Saya looked confused.

"Catch up to Kai and help him shop. I need you to buy this, and this."

Mao giggled as she handed Saya the piece of paper.

"I don't think Kai can buy these on his own. But he has the wallet . . ."

"All right." Saya was accommodating, as always. The problem was going to be from her lady-killer boyfriend.

Saya walked down the steps to the sidewalk, and Hagi was about to follow when Mao grabbed his arm with both hands.

"I have a favor to ask of you, too."

"Me . . . ?"

Hagi's face revealed a rare state of bewilderment. She wasn't about to let him go, but she looked up at him, smiling sweetly.

"I was just thinking I needed a man's help, so I thought I would borrow you from Otonashi for a few hours."

"Saya . . ."

He looked like a confused child calling for his mother. Saya called back to him to calm him down.

"Don't worry. I'll be with Kai. Help Jahana-san with what she needs."

"Understood."

It was not Hagi's place to contradict Saya. Mao pushed the back of the helpless young man through the front door, then called back to Saya, "Thanks! If you hurry, you should be able to catch Kai before he gets on the subway!"

She had done her part. The rest depended on Kai and Saya.

As Mao pushed Hagi up the stairs to the second floor she anticipated a good fight between the two of them: the thick-headed but easily embarrassed Kai, and Saya, completely

oblivious to romance and passion. If they could at least end up holding hands, Mao would consider the mission a complete success . . .

"First, I need you to replace the burned-out light bulbs. After that you can clean out the gutters."

"... I see."

"What're you doing?"

Lulu stepped out from the apartment into the hallway and looked back and forth at Hagi and Mao with great interest.

Perfect timing. Mao summoned the Schiff girl over.

"This gentleman is going to do some work around the apartment. Is there anything you can think of that needs cleaning or fixing? No job is too small; just let us know."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, she is." Hagi seemed to have accepted his fate. Lulu seemed to have been looking for something a little more exciting, and turned around to peer back into the apartment.

"Well, no one has cleaned the tub today."

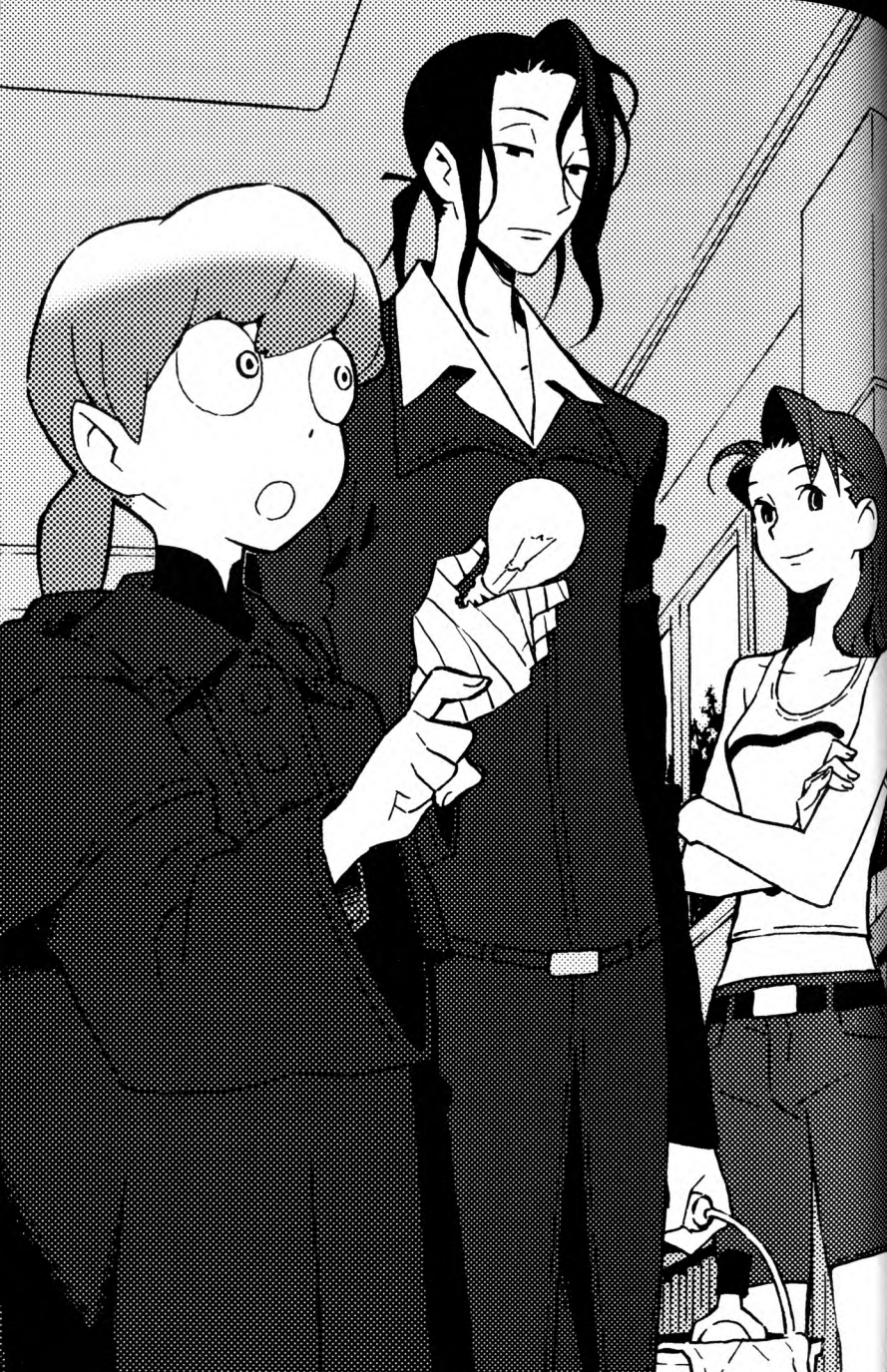
"OK, add that to the list."

"Understood . . ."

It was going to be a long day for Hagi.

The apartment was a sight for sore eyes.

Since the creation of Red Shield, the closest thing to a home David had known were the headquarters wherever he was stationed, but this apartment in New York was starting to fall into that category.



At the very least, it was better than a hospital bed. Sleeping while his comrades were still in battle was not acceptable.

"David, it hasn't even been a week." Julia voiced her concern.

"I'm fine." His muscles felt tired and weak from lack of use, but at least he was back on his feet.

"You never change . . ."

Julia had become more outspoken since her return. Before she had left, she had flowed like water around topics, calm and quiet, never letting her emotions show.

David was happy she was back. With her in charge of Saya's health regimen, things were sure to improve. And David couldn't bring himself to drink anyone's coffee but hers.

"Your injuries were fairly severe. Are you sure you're all right?" Joel's serious, concerned face matched Julia's.

David tapped the bandages under his shirt. "Would the doctors have let me go otherwise?"

Joel smiled. "Since when do you listen to doctors? Don't forget, there are people here who worry about you."

". . . Yes."

David knew who Joel was talking about. He glanced and caught Julia's eyes before his expression stiffened. His mission was to support Saya in her fight against the Chiropterans. Any personal feelings would have to wait until after Diva was dead.

"What the hell is this?" The frantic exclamation came from the couch in front of the TV.

David and the others around the living-room table turned to see.

Okamura had been doing follow-up research on the Chiropteran riot at the military base, but now he looked intently at the television.

"Check this out!"

It was a cable news channel.

A middle-aged female reporter in a Cacharel suit was speaking from what looked like the aftermath of a riot. In the background, NYPD squad cars and SWAT team members could be seen moving around behind a row of barricades.

"According to a statement from the NYPD, the incident occurred when several patients with SZN, Sudden-onset Zooanthropic Neomorphism, escaped from quarantine. The NYPD requested help from the army to secure the area. The situation is under control and there were no other incidents to report."

The scene shifted to the police station, where the chief of police was taking questions from reporters. The images were from the night before.

The cops had probably been barricaded out by the military. The camera was located far from the incident. In the dark of the night it was hard to make much out, but David couldn't mistake what he saw.

"Corpse Corps . . ."

The manufactured Chiropterans had been brought in by the army to stop any outbreaks.

"The government has promised to investigate the cause of the outbreak and has denied rumors that SZN is a contagious disease. In addition, Secretary of Defense Grant stated that, in case of another similar incident, the army would be prepared with the same containment protocols."

David leaned on the back of the couch, staring at the screen.

"So this was their goal all along . . ."



"Manufacture your own enemies, then exterminate them yourself . . . It's a truly ingenious plan." Louis punctuated his sarcasm with a snort.

They had cooked up SZN as a convenient excuse for the Chiropteran outbreaks. Some politicians were already urging citizens to keep an eye on their neighbors for any unusual behavior that might signal the onset of the fictional disease.

Fighting a common enemy would unite the fractured nation. Citizens would turn to the government for reassurance and protection. In the public eye, Chiropterans would take on the same role as an enemy state or terrorist group, but these enemies could be controlled from within.

"But Grant won't be satisfied keeping it in this country. I'm thinking about what they did in England." Joel spoke with confidence. David had been thinking the same thing.

The outbreak at the base had been caused by Cinq Flèches-manufactured food laced with D67. Cinq Flèches was a gigantic conglomerate, and its products were sold all over the world. Beyond that they sponsored many charity programs, which supplied large quantities of food and medical supplies to African refugee camps and the poor and needy in the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia.

What happened in England and Vietnam could happen all over the world.

"Julia, based on the most recent data, what is the expected outbreak ratio?"

Julia replied to Joel's question methodically. "Based on the distribution of Cinq Flèches products across international

markets, around 3 percent of the world's population has come into contact with their food or medical products. And according to Cinq Flèches' own experimental data, one in every ten thousand of those people will spontaneously develop SZN."

"That's a pretty low figure. Let's see . . ." Louis's eyes moved to the ceiling and his fingers bent down one by one. Before he could complete his calculations, Okamura spoke up.

"Right now the world's population is 6.3 billion people. One ten-thousandth of 3 percent . . . That would give roughly twenty thousand people the latent potential to transform into Chiropterans."

"But that's just the total, right? I mean, it's not like they're all going to be transforming tomorrow . . ." Louis seemed taken aback by the number.

Julia's eyes narrowed. "We can't be optimistic."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Diva's singing voice. Are you familiar with the concept of *synchronicity*?"

"From Jung, right?" David had heard the term, but never from a scientist's mouth.

"Yes. It refers to a union of causally unrelated but nonetheless meaningful coincidences . . . Is that a good way of putting it?"

"Coincidences. I see. Shall I go get some plum pudding so we can play at Deschamps and Fortgibu while we discuss more outlandish theories?"

"I'd like to hear Julia-sensei's thoughts without the witty banter. What were you saying about Diva's singing?" The photographer sounded uncharacteristically serious.

Julia turned to Okamura as she spoke.

"From what I read of the Cinq Flèches files, recordings of Diva's voice did not trigger Chiropteran transformations in subjects with Base D. Despite that, at the army base in Dayton audience members who ate Cinq Flèches candy bars and heard Diva's concert turned into Chiropterans."

"People outside the base probably ate the candy bars, too."

And despite this, there were no reports of anyone outside of the base becoming Chiropterans. Considering the magnitude of such an event, it would have been hard to suppress news of it entirely.

Okamura considered David's words as he stroked his chin. "Footage from Diva's concert was on the news the next day. But no one who watched the broadcast turned into a Chiropteran."

Joel spoke up. "So the people who became Chiropterans were at the concert, had Base D in their systems, and heard Diva sing."

Julia pushed up her glasses and nodded. "That is correct."

"That's the synchronicity? . . . Julia, what would be the percentage of transformation in a population meeting all the conditions?" David asked the question and saw Julia's face go pale.

She paused for half a second before giving her answer.

"It would be close to 100 percent."

"Taking it from one in every three hundred thousand humans to one in thirty." Okamura said the words no one wanted to hear.

Joel turned to David. "Isn't the program at the Met going to be broadcast live worldwide via satellite?"

". . . It is." A sweat broke out on David's forehead as an ominous reality crossed his mind. It wasn't the heat. The chill rose from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.

*Three percent of six and a half billion . . .*

When Diva started to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House, almost two hundred million people would transform into Chiropterans in a matter of minutes.

Did the American government have any idea what was coming? Chances were, they saw the Delta Project as little more than Cinq Flèches giving them the means to consolidate their country's power.

Grant and Brett were incredibly cunning. They surely understood Anshel Goldsmith was not a pushover as a partner, but even they couldn't have suspected the true nature of his plans.

What happened at Diva's performance would determine the fate of humanity.

As Mao had predicted, Saya caught up with Kai on the subway platform as he waited for the train.

"What are you doing here?"

"Jahana-san had some things she wanted me to pick up for her."

"Mao? I can buy 'em."

Kai took a look at the list Saya held in her hand and blanched.

". . . Right. Saya, maybe you'd better come along after all."

"That's what I was trying to tell you."

Kai tried to keep his cool, but his ears had turned red. Seeing Kai in such an uncomfortable state made Saya laugh. Kai could face Chiropterans in battle, but he still panicked at the thought of buying feminine hygiene products.

Soon after the announcement on the speakers, a strong gust of wind blew Saya's hair about. She hadn't cut it in a while,

and it had gotten longer than usual. She watched the silvery train car pull up and mused on how much dirtier the New York subways looked in movies.

"Saya!" Kai's cry jerked her back to reality as he caught her by the wrist and jerked her back, and she realized that she had been beginning to fall toward the tracks and the oncoming train.

Kai grasped her shoulders and supported her.

"Are you OK?"

"N-huh . . ."

Saya could feel how much stronger he'd gotten in the last months. For some reason, the revelation embarrassed her, and she turned her eyes from his face as the train ground to a stop.

She pulled away from him, but her legs were not steady, and she lurched forward, falling into the open door of the subway car.

There weren't many people riding the subway at midday. Kai followed Saya into the empty car.

The New York subway was similar to the system in Tokyo: it looked complicated on the surface, but the stations were close enough together that it was hard to get too far off route. It was a simple matter for Saya and Kai to get from Grand Street Station to Prince and Broadway.

Shopping itself didn't take much time, but a week's worth of food for ten people—in terms of appetite, Louis counted as at least two—would be a big load, far more than the two of them could carry.

"Wait a minute. We always have the groceries delivered, so we wouldn't have had to carry anything home anyway. What was Mao talking about, 'carrying all those bags under the blazing hot sun' . . . ?" Kai grumbled under his breath as he signed the receipt.

His ability to take care of so many different things at once made him really reliable, Saya felt. If the clerk had asked her their address she might have had trouble.

Finished with the transaction, Kai put the change in his wallet as he turned around.

A picture in the billfold caught Saya's eyes.

Riku and Kai and her—their final photo together in Paris.

Kai became aware of Saya's gaze and smiled. He looked a little uncomfortable.

"I still think about Riku a lot," he confessed. "Dad, too."

"I know . . . Me, too."

Saya had one of the pictures from the strip, too. Until they had reunited with Kai in London, she and Hagi had fought Chiropterans alone. She had carried that picture on her the entire time. Just as George's crystal gave her courage, seeing Riku in the photo cemented her determination to fight until the end.

Outside the supermarket, the sun reflected off the streets and buildings.

It reminded Saya of the hot Okinawan summers.

Kai was silent as he turned toward the train station, but after a moment, he began to speak.

"... Back when Diva attacked Riku at the Zoo . . . I said some pretty harsh things to you."

Saya looked at his profile as she felt a pain grow in her heart—not the pain she had felt back then, but the pain Kai was feeling now.

He had been carrying the burden of his regret this whole time.

"Seeing Riku like that—he was all I could think about . . . And, I mean, it had to have been just as hard for you, but I had to shoot

my mouth off like an idiot . . . Sometimes Riku is angry at me in my dreams. He says, 'Niichan, what've you been doing?'"

Saya could see Riku's loving gaze as he gently chastised his big brother. "Riku is still alive . . . in our memories, Kai."

"Yeah. Not only Riku."

Kai's right hand moved up his shirt and grasped the choker around his neck. The red crystal it held, like the one in Saya's katana, must have come from George's blood.

"Dad and Aurélien, Moses and Carmen, Elizaveta and everyone from Red Shield . . . Anyone who fought will never be forgotten by me."

"I won't forget, either. I don't want to forget . . ." Saya was thinking not only of the people who had died, but also those whom they had parted paths from . . . Kaori, Min and Anna-Marie, Grey and Javia and Nahabi. The time she had spent with each of them had been priceless. And she knew that, no matter what happened, she would never forget the people she was with now.

"But there is something else I can't forget."

Her promise—

That was why so many people had been hurt. It was all her responsibility . . . She didn't want Kai to look back with regret. She had to do this on her own.

After it was all over she would put her crimes behind her and rest. But it would be hard on him.

". . . Saya."

Kai stopped and called her name.

Saya paused and looked back.

"Live on."

Saya felt the weight of his words on her chest.

"Live on till the very end—"

Saya grabbed Kai's hand. She wanted to tell him what she was feeling, how much he meant to her, but instead, she simply said, "I will not let you die." Her voice was quiet but firm, and the eyes gazing into his were solemn. "I will protect you—no matter what."

The promise was for her as much as it was for him. She wanted Kai to live. He had already lost so much. And if he still lived, then she, too, could live on in his heart with Riku and George, sleeping in his warm memories.

"Saya . . ."

"Please. Kai, you are too kind. The last thing she wanted to do was to sound critical."

"Sorry . . ."

She didn't like seeing Kai look this down. The last thing she wanted was to sound critical.

"Nankurunaisha." Saya's voice resonated with confidence as she spoke the word.

Kai looked up in surprise, and Saya smiled back at him.

"Those are the magic words you taught me, Kai."

". . . Yeah, I remember."

Kai's expression loosened up. It was a look that matched him better. Whenever people were stressed or down, Kai had always been the one to cheer them up.

Saya squeezed Kai's hand. She then pulled him to get him moving.

"Let's finish shopping! We still need to get those things for Jahana-san."



"He-hey!"

Kai stumbled, but Saya saw his smile as she pulled him by his hand down the sidewalk.

Only today.

Today, for a few hours, she would forget about her battle.

Saya realized they had come all the way to New York, and she hadn't done any sightseeing. For the first time in a long time, she felt like Saya Otonashi, the high-school student of two years ago, as she and Kai set out to explore the city.

From the Statue of Liberty to Times Square, the Museum of Modern Art to Yankee Stadium, it was a whirlwind of a day. She tried on designer clothes she could only see in magazines in Okinawa and she ate the largest hot dog she had ever seen.

Today, she and Kai would relax and play to their hearts' content.

It had been a long time since she had emerged from her shell and allowed her soul to breathe and shine in the open air.

Had Nathan been keeping surveillance on him the entire time, or had he suddenly appeared in Solomon's living room on a whim, for a surprise visit?

Either way, Nathan was Diva's devoted Chevalier, whereas Solomon had rejected that path and betrayed their mistress. They should have blessed each other in blood at their reunion, but Nathan had another reason for seeking out the rogue Chevalier.

"Don't you want to see Diva's babies?"

Nathan revealed himself in the penthouse with that invitation. That must mean Diva had already given birth.

The children of his former queen. With all that had happened, it was hard to be indifferent, but if he had not still felt the sting of Saya's rejection, Solomon might not have accepted the offer so obediently.

It had been a long time since he had visited Nathan's place. Since Solomon's last fight with Anshel the lawn and marble pillar had been repaired.

The air under the shade of a tree stirred with a beautiful song. If possible, Diva's voice had grown even more beautiful than before.

Diva's form looked like that of a young boy, but the way she was sitting looked very adult. A big crib rested at her knees, and soft white frills spilled out from the inside. Lying on the cushion inside, covered with a soft white blanket, were not babies but cocoons.

Diva's song melted into the wind and as she paused, she looked down into the crib.

"How are you feeling, my little ones?"

From her eyes poured a limitless supply of love and affection onto the cocoons. Could she hear the cooing of her babies inside the thin thread wraps?

During the decades Solomon had served Diva, he had never seen this expression on her face before. There was no mistaking she was now a mother.

Escorted by Nathan, Solomon stood close by, without saying a word.

Diva slowly looked up.

"You came to greet my babies?"

The queen was indifferent to the return of her rebellious Chevalier. It was as if she had completely forgotten the past. She was absorbed in her own happiness.

"Anshel cut my belly open and took them out."

"Say, Solomon." He felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Nathan's whisper close to his ear. "Now that the next generation of queens has been born, you don't need to keep chasing after Saya. There's no reason for us to keep fighting."

He wanted Solomon to step back in line as a Chevalier. Whether Nathan was speaking on Diva's behalf or had convinced her to let him try to win Solomon back, Solomon couldn't tell. There was only one thing that he was sure of.

"My love is dedicated to Saya."

"Even though she rejected you?"

But nothing Nathan could say could change Solomon's heart. Saya was everything to him. His eternal life belonged to her, and her alone.

He would not stray.

". . . Say, Solomon. Grow up a little."

Not only the tone of Nathan's voice, but also the look on his face changed as he drew closer to Solomon. His mischievous, effeminate manner disappeared, and he glared into Solomon's eyes, deadly serious.

However, Solomon did not fear his brother.

"I am sorry."

He hadn't come back just to reminisce about the past. The obedient Chevalier Solomon was gone. What was here now was Saya's most dedicated assassin.

"Wha—?"

Nathan shouted in surprise. In the blink of an eye, Solomon had slipped from Nathan's grasp and slid like a shadow into the shade behind Diva.

"Die, Diva."

His hand converted into a blade and he swung it over her shoulder, ready to draw the edge across her neck.

One millimeter away.

Solomon froze.

The face that Diva looked up at him with was Saya's.

... No!

He quelled his moment of hesitation and plunged his blade toward Diva's skull. But he was already too late.

He sliced only her afterimage, as Diva had whipped around behind him. She nestled in close to Solomon's spine, and her hands, as soft as whipped cream, grasped his shoulders.

"I will not die by your hand."

She laughed, and Solomon, still frozen, felt her fingers stroke his earlobe softly. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain at the side of his neck.

He felt his blood being pulled from his body and things began to blur.

"Urk..."

He tried to turn and swing his blade behind him, but Diva was already gone.

He looked up to the sun flickering between the leaves—and Diva falling right towards him. He jumped back to avoid her.

He retreated about ten meters, then pushed off the ground to make another rush at Diva.

Just as she landed on the ground, her long hair curled like a tail towards her face.

Diva's ice-blue eyes narrowed.

He would not be able to catch her off guard, nor could he depend on her mercy. This was not Saya.

Solomon kept his focus on her neck and swung his blade.

The silver edge met nothing but empty space.

Diva smiled as she fell, dipping backwards like she was falling onto a bed to avoid his attack.

Solomon panicked.

*Why can't I touch her?*

Chevaliers protected their queen. Battle-tested, he should have been stronger than his queen.

But none of his attacks even reached Diva.

Was indecision slowing his blade? No, that wasn't possible.

He had dedicated his life to Saya. Before him was nothing but another enemy.

As Solomon pursued Diva, he glimpsed Nathan standing in the shade of the trees.

He held the future queens' bassinet in one hand and wore his usual sardonic smile.

His queen was being pursued. He was ignoring his duties as a Chevalier by not trying to stop Solomon.

It was because Diva didn't want his help.

Was it because she didn't feel she was in danger? Did she think he couldn't kill her?

Because she was wrong.

He could do it for Saya.

Solomon's eyes glowed red, and he cried out as he rushed at her again, his blade glowing white. Diva retreated through the garden.

Solomon pressed on in pursuit, his blade swinging wildly.

The bisected marble pillars reflected the light of the sun like mirrors as they fell one by one to the ground, which was already littered with fallen trees.

The ground was scattered by falling trees as well.

But Diva was like the wind.

Not one drop of her blood was spilled as she dodged Solomon's storm of attacks.

It almost seemed like she was enjoying her dance through the air.

Solomon was completely confused.

*No matter what I do, I can't get to her! Why?*

*"Want me to tell you?"*

Suddenly, her voice tickled his cheek.

She dodged the diagonal slice of his blade, letting it slide just past her chest as she laughed in Saya's voice.

In a flash, her cold hand reached out and attached itself to his face.

Solomon tried to resist, but once again, he felt her fangs break the skin of his neck.

*"Nn . . . ggh . . ."*

He could feel his life force being sucked away from him.

Solomon would not last long like this. His knees buckled and hit the ground, but Diva's lips remained locked tight to his neck.

*As least now I can pay for my sins with my soul—*

Solomon raised his right arm—once again flesh and blood—as if reaching for the sky. His hand finally fell limp just as the blood-soaked lips separated from his neck.

Solomon felt Diva's gaze as she stood over him and he somehow found the strength to turn his head.

"You cannot hurt me so long as my blood flows through your veins."

Diva wiped the blood dripping from her mouth with the back of her hand. The gleaming intensity in her eyes began to fade.

"But I took all that blood back."

"Diva . . . didn't you overdo it?"

Nathan raised the sun visor on the bassinet as he walked toward Diva and Solomon. He looked around the garden, which now stood in shambles, and sighed.

"I already had to fix it back up once. It's a real hassle, you know!"

"Sorry, Nathan. But it's Solomon's fault." No longer Saya's double, Diva had morphed back into her androgynous form, half-borrowed from Riku.

The glare she directed at Solomon was not filled with hatred. She looked more like a child that grew bored with the game she had been playing.

"Clean this up before Anshel comes back. I don't want him anymore."

"All right. All right." Nathan laughed, no longer able to put up a fight, and handed Diva the bassinet. She headed straight for the house, probably to keep the cocoons out of the hot sun.

Solomon could do nothing but watch.

His entire body had gone numb, as if all four of his limbs had been removed.

Chevaliers were said to be immortal, but with most of his blood drained, he could hardly move, let alone stand.

"Poor Solomon . . . But you chose this path for yourself."

There was no sign of compassion on Nathan's face.

He seemed less concerned with Solomon's betrayal of Diva than with the damage done to his garden.

But Solomon had no regrets.

He was only disappointed he couldn't fulfill Saya's wish.

Nathan met Solomon's eyes and frowned.

"You really are the stupidest Chevalier ever."

The setting sun painted the long steel bridge a vivid orange.

It was the Queensboro Bridge that connected Queens to Manhattan. But Saya and Kai had chosen to take a much shakier route across the East River: the tram.

It took four minutes to cross from East 59th Street to Roosevelt Island, and for just two dollars, riders got an incredible view.

From seventy-six meters above the ground, New York City was beautiful. The shifting colors in the sky reflected against the skyscrapers that lined the horizon.

"It's gorgeous . . ."

Seeing the city slowly pass by, Saya let out a deep breath. Beside her, Kai nodded.

"Yeah."

"If only this moment could last forever . . ."



The day was almost over. But Saya couldn't imagine anywhere she would rather be than the cabin of the tram. She wanted to watch this beautiful sunset, just Kai and her, forever.

But time never stopped running.

Billions of people lived under this same setting sun. Once, Saya had lived as one of them. She dreamed of going back to Okinawa and living a normal life—having fun, getting stressed, loving, hating, crying, laughing.

It was the one thing she wanted—and the one thing she could never have.

"Saya."

Kai said her name softy and she turned her head.

"Remember when we were in England, how I talked about reopening Dad's shop when we go back to Okinawa?"

"Yeah . . ."

Kai could really do it, too. He had enough confidence to turn his ideas into reality.

He put his right hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out something pink and shiny.

It was a key.

"This . . . ?"

"It's a key to Omoro."

"Omoro . . ." Saya gazed steadily at the key in her hand.

Pink was her favorite color. Kai must have made it especially for her.

"I want us to go back together."

Saya lifted her head at Kai's words.

"... Together?"



"I want to start the new Omoro together with you." His eyes were filled with hope and determination.

*Together with you.*

The words pierced her heart.

The future Kai looked forward to included her.

The tram began moving down from its highest point, and the view once again filled with buildings.

Saya caught her reflection in the glass and saw tears stream down her face. She quickly wiped them away with her hands.

"Unless you don't want to . . . ?"

Kai's face drooped, and Saya shook her head.

"No, I'm happy. It made me really happy."

She spoke from her heart.

Half of her tears were from the joy of hearing Kai's feelings; she couldn't keep her emotions from overflowing. And the other half—pain at the knowledge that the promise she was bound to would keep his dream from coming true.

When Kai went back to Okinawa, Saya would not be at his side.

"... Kai."

She called his name as she squeezed the key to the future.

"Yeah."

"... I wonder if the weather will be this nice tomorrow?"

As hard as she tried, she couldn't say what she really wanted to.

The sunset she could see between the buildings was as brilliant as it was painful.

That night after they got home to the apartment, Saya noticed that her movements felt sluggish and her muscles cold.

Her body was gradually shutting down.

There had been signs.

She had had brief dizzy spells when she and Kai were walking in Soho and again while they were crossing the river from Roosevelt Island to Manhattan. She hadn't lost consciousness, but she seemed to get closer every time.

Even now, as she sat on her bed, she felt lightheaded and sleepy, and the feeling of being pulled into a coma was unnerving.

Saya tried to stand up using her katana for support, but her legs were shaky, and without Hagi's help she couldn't find her equilibrium.

"You can't fight in this condition."

"No. I'll fight."

Saya sat back on the bed and pulled away from Hagi's sympathetic hand reaching for her shoulder.

"There is no next time."

Once Saya entered her hibernation, Diva would be unstoppable, and she was drawing closer every day. Julia's treatments could buy her a little time, but it was like putting out a volcano with a garden hose.

"The next time I wake up, it could be to a world swarming with Chiropterans. That's why I have to stop Diva now, and end all this."

For the sake of the world, there was no other choice.

"Have you told him yet?"

Saya's breath caught in her throat.

She knew Hagi was talking about Kai.

Hagi looked concerned. "He doesn't know about the promise you and I made together."

"It's better that he doesn't know. If he knew, he would try to stop me . . . If that happened, I would . . ."

*Would wish to live my life in the future Kai envisioned.*

Was it so terrible an idea—forgiving herself?

"—Live for tomorrow?" Hagi's words echoed her thoughts.

"Don't say that!" Saya cut him off angrily. Then, her voice softened. "We can't live together with humans."

"But surely he would . . ."

Hagi had never before argued with her so persistently. She hadn't realized until now how much faith he had in Kai.

"The future Kai dreams of . . . is too dazzling for me. I am a Chiropteran. And I cannot afford to hope for a future."

Saya looked up through her tears at the blurry image of the young man who shared her blood.

"Hagi . . . Tell me to fight."

Hagi was silent.

"Please . . . I beg you."

" . . . Saya." He paused, his eyes pleading. "Fight."

His soft and sad words appeased Saya's pounding heart.

"Thank you, Hagi."

Saya hung her head and looked at her wrinkled sheets as she spoke.

She couldn't bear to look at the sorrow in Hagi's eyes.

Footsteps echoed down the stairs.

Solomon opened his eyes and waited for his vision to focus.

A pair of impeccably polished leather shoes stopped a few feet from where Solomon hung.

"Mama's pet, the lovely Solomon, now lower than a dirty farm animal."

Solomon didn't reply.

He had never seen James act this way before. He was a man of order and efficiency. Not one to waste time and energy on swaggering or spite, he was guided by his unflagging loyalty to Diva.

But now James's self-confidence seemed threatened. Maybe he was desperately trying to prove his worth to Diva.

"How does it feel to lose so much blood you nearly die?"

"You're in a good mood, James." Solomon countered through cracked lips. He didn't have the energy to raise his head, let alone break the thick chains that tethered his wrists to the ceiling, but he had no intention of satisfying James by showing fear.

James's eyebrows furrowed in irritation and he slammed the back of his hand into Solomon's face. His head spinning, Solomon averted his gaze from his younger brother's intense glare.

James grabbed Solomon's chin and forced his head up.

"Now I am off to kill Saya."

Solomon's eyes went wide.

"You betrayed Mama. I am going to bring you Saya's head to teach you a lesson. When I get back, you can kiss it as Salomé kissed the head of Iokanaan."

With that, James turned his back and stalked out of the room, his laugh echoing behind him.

Solomon's heart burned in anxiety.

"... Saya."

She was approaching the time of her sleep, and Solomon doubted she could hold her own against James, especially now.

*When she needs you most, you fail her? Stupid Solomon Goldsmith. No wonder Saya didn't want you.*

He should have the power to tear through the chains, but now he barely had the strength to rattle them.

Solomon tried to focus himself.

One millimeter at a time. He could break these bonds. He had to.

Something in the air changed.

Solomon looked again at the open door, this time with intensity in his eyes.

Nathan stood silently in front of him.

"You amaze me. How is it that you can push yourself so far for Saya?"

Nathan was watching Solomon, his arms folded in front of his chest, his face pensive.

Nathan was a strange man.

He was the younger of the brothers, but at the same time he was a mystery to Solomon. He dressed flamboyantly and played the fun-loving artist, but he had more ambition than even Anshel, and he looked very old and very serious right now.

Solomon answered him honestly. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No one ordered me to do it. I chose this path on my own—to dedicate my entire life to Saya."

Nathan's eyes softened.

"Straying from your path, blinded by love . . . If you had only met Saya a little sooner, this might have been a very different world."

" . . . "

"Do you want to go to her?"

Nathan extended his right hand and touched the chains at Solomon's wrists.

Solomon didn't answer, and just looked at him, trying to fathom his intentions.

With a flicker of Nathan's fingers, the iron chains fell to the floor, crushed like broken candy. Nathan's next words fell with the same relentless weight.

"I want you to show me. Rewrite the tale of Salomé with your love."

Diva's final performance at the Metropolitan was in ten days.

In that time, there was a limit to what they could get done.

So David decided on what he called Plan B.

If for any reason they were unable to kill Diva on the day of the performance, they would have to find a way to prevent the broadcast. They needed a quick and easy way to disrupt the satellite signal, and the most efficient way to do that would be destroying the antenna broadcasting the signal at its source.

It took five days to pinpoint the targets and coordinate with other Red Shield cells for the manpower and equipment they'd need. Preparations took another day, and by the time everything was ready to go, only three days remained before the performance.

They were cutting it very close.



Joining David on the late-night mission to the Staten Island relay station were Kai, Louis, and, finally, Okamura.

Saya had offered her assistance as well, but David had refused.

"You stay here and rest. This operation doesn't include Chiropterans. We have enough manpower to pull it off."

After seeing the four of them off, Saya made her way back to her bedroom, but just as she lay down on her bed, she heard the door open.

She instinctively grabbed her katana, which lay next to her pillow, and sat up to see Lulu looking at her in surprise.

"What's wrong?"

"... Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." Lulu looked up at her nervously. "I was watching TV in the other room, but Mao put on a boring show . . . I was thinking it might be OK for me to come in here."

Between local broadcast and cable TV there were an unbelievable number of channels in America, but there was only one television in the living room. When Mao was in charge of the remote control, the chance of her choosing one of Lulu's beloved cartoons lay somewhere between slim and none.

Usually Louis or Kai kept Lulu company, but they were both gone, so Lulu was probably a little bored. It wasn't hard to imagine the process of elimination that had brought Lulu to the bedroom where Saya and Hagi, the other two Chiropterans, were.

"It's fine. Hagi, turn on the lights."

Saya smiled and Lulu happily bounded into the room. Sitting on a chair at the wall with his cello in hand, Hagi flipped on the light switch.

Lulu sat across from him and took a long look at not only the instrument, but also his hands as he held it. She really was a normal girl.

Saya sat on her bed with her back to the wall and watched her. Lulu was the last of the Schiff.

Saya had lost Riku and George, but Lulu mourned far more of her family members. She wasn't alone—Kai had made her a new member of the family, and Mao and Louis seemed to get along well with her, too—but Saya knew it wasn't the same.

If Julia could find a way to give Lulu more longevity, Saya wanted to do anything she could to make that happen. For the sake of Moses and Aurélien and the other Schiff, Lulu deserved the chance to live a full life.

This was another reason she continued to fight.

The music flowing from the cello stopped abruptly as Hagi's pupils dilated and his gaze shot to the window.

A moment later, the apartment rocked from the sound of shattering glass as a shower of crimson spikes tore apart Saya's headboard and perforated the wall closest to the hallway.

Saya flipped over on the bed and landed on the floor on one knee, drawing her katana from its sheath. Without hesitating, she pressed her thumb to the back of the blade and allowed her blood to flow through the grooves in the sword.

She smelled Chiropterans.

"Wha-what the hell is going on?"

"Jahana-san, stay with Julia!" Saya called back toward the living room.

Hagi and Lulu had already jumped through the hole in the wall outside. Saya dove after them.

Waiting in the street below was a figure darker than the night sky.

Hagi struck with his right hand and Lulu with her battle-ax, and the sounds of metal grating on metal rang out. Sparks lit up Hagi's face.

The exoskeleton covering the arms that had risen to block their blows was harder than steel.

"What?!"

Lulu was thrown backwards and careened into a streetlamp. The metal pole bent in the middle.

Hagi, too, flew backwards, but he twisted back in midair to initiate a second strike.

But this enemy was not about to let that happen.

Crimson darts shot from his extended hands.

Hagi leaped and rolled to dodge the missiles, but the unrelenting stream of projectiles followed his movements with the persistence of machine-gun fire. Pieces of the building's façade began to chip away under the barrage, as Hagi pushed off a lamppost and switched directions.

As the creature turned to follow him, Saya bore down in on him from above.

"Yaaa!"

Her wrists vibrated from the painful impact.

Her blade pounded the beast at the base of his neck in a perfect swing, but couldn't do more than scuff his outer shell.

"Saya Otonashi!"

The monster spoke her name with great delight and swung both arms at her. Saya punched him with her left hand and pushed away from his body just at the wrecking ball-like, massive arms came crashing down, raising sparks from the asphalt.

Saya flipped once in the air and landed on her feet. She quickly brought her katana forward, but she could feel her knees tremble.

She gritted her teeth and struggled to stay conscious.

"I am here for your head! Are you familiar with the story of Salomé and Iokanaan?"

Saya glared at the shiny black body illuminated under the streetlamp.

". . . James Ironside!"

She had seen his flesh crystallize as he fell into the bottomless pit on Christina Island. But now, here he was, alive and attacking her.

With the moon at his back outlining his robust figure, just knowing it was James whom she faced was daunting enough.

"You remembered my name. I couldn't forget you. After all the pain and humiliation you caused!"

James's left arm suddenly rose up to repel Lulu's attack from his blind spot.

"Wha—!" Lulu landed on her feet, her ax at the ready, but it was becoming clear her blade would not be enough to break through his skin.

James bent his knees and caught her battle-ax in the palm of his hand, pitching Lulu to the ground.

"Gyaa . . ."

Lulu shrieked like a cat as the concrete cracked from her impact.

James lifted his right leg to crush her.

"The last Schiff. I'll send you to see your friends."

"No!" Saya raced towards them and caught James's leg before he could bring it down, twisting it aside and pushing him off balance. Then, she aimed her sword at his chest and swung with all her might.

A shower of sparks flew from the blade, and the onyx monster reeled back.

Hagi took this opportunity to scoop up Lulu and flew past James's feet like the wind.

Already off balance, James hopped back on one foot, and Saya stayed on him like a tempest.

"Kyaaa!"

Her seething rage welled up from her throat, and she drove forward with her bare blade at a blinding speed.

Her sword bounced off his chest, this way and that. Again and again, sparks lit up the night sky. Before the sound of one impact had faded, Saya had brought her sword around as fast as lightning to hit him again.

In the space of a single second, she unleashed strike after strike after strike, until the sparks were a steady light and the crashes a shrill roar slicing through the silent street.

With no time to defend himself, James had no choice but to retreat.

Saya's blows forced him from the sidewalk to the street, and he was able to regain his footing on the rough asphalt. The glow in his eyes indicated he was ready to counter.

She ceased her cyclone attack and jumped backwards as James's arms swept through the place Saya had stood a few moments earlier and smashed into the road.

Saya's shoulders heaved as she tried to catch her breath, and she lowered her katana.

As James pulled his arms from the asphalt, Saya confirmed what she had feared: of the hundreds of hits she had landed, not one had damaged the monstrous Chevalier. The only marks her blade had left were a lattice of thread-thin scratches on his armor-like shell.

"Have you forgotten?" James roared. "My skin is solid armor. It's even more perfect since I was born again. There are no weak spots you can slither into!"

James raised up his arms, and crimson spikes sprung from his body.

To avoid the rapid barrage of missiles, Saya dashed to the side. The spikes followed, falling like sharp, boiling drops of rain onto the asphalt.

Her path was limited by buildings, and Saya soon found herself cornered, forced to try to deflect the arrows. But in her weakened state, her reaction time had begun to slow, and her endurance was tapped. There was only so long she could hold out.

". . . Rkk—"

A spike pierced her right shoulder. The impact spun Saya halfway around, bringing her face to face with James as he fired off another barrage.

There was no way to block the attack with her sword, so she covered her head with her arm and ducked down. But before the spikes could find their target, a tall black shadow came at her from her side.

"Saya!"

Hagi grabbed her shoulders and turned, blocking the projectiles with his own body.

"Hagi!"

"I'm fine . . . Be careful, Saya."

Saya looked up to see James gloating at their anguish.

"I want to see my brother's pain as he brings his lips to your bloody head . . . I will dedicate this great spectacle to Diva!"

Saya grabbed the spike stuck in her shoulder and tried to ignore the pain as she pulled it out.

Blood splattered the ground below.

James advanced. As she lifted her sword with both hands, Saya's head spun and her vision blurred.

Hagi still stood in front of her, and without waiting for his wounds to heal, he dove in to draw James's attack.

The ends of James's arms elongated into spikes and bore through the air, impaling Hagi's chest.

"Get out of my way!" James roared as he leaned back before hurtling Hagi's body toward the apartment building's wall. A large metal dumpster bent like aluminum foil as it collapsed beneath the impact.

James turned and rushed at Saya.

She desperately tried to deflect him with her katana, but her stance and grip were weak, and the blow sent her sword flying. She stooped down to pick it up and felt everything begin to go black.

What brought her back to consciousness was, ironically, a blow from her enemy.

"...!"

James jumped up, landing his kneecap on her chin and knocking her head backward.

An arc of blood painted the path from her lips, and she hit the street spine first with a sickening crunch.

Saya pushed herself up with two hands and spun around. Her opponent had disappeared.

She felt the air move and quickly looked to see the large form of the monster bearing down on her from above.

In order to avoid taking the entire weight of the Chiropteran on her body, Saya rolled to the side.

The impact on the blacktop sent a wave through the street. The asphalt and the rocky sand beneath it were blown into the air.

Still on the ground, Saya slipped through the smoke, hunting for her katana. It was all she could do not to scream from the searing pain in her right arm.

"... Unh..."

Suddenly, the grotesque-looking, armor-plated leg slammed down onto her right hand.

"Your blade is right here."

Her fallen sword was in his hand. Most of James's weight was still on his other foot; gauging the pain, Saya thought that her bones were still intact.

"Get away from Saya!"

James slowly turned to see Lulu at his back. She hit him with her battle-ax countless times on his shoulders and back, but it was obvious he didn't consider her a threat.

"Just in time. Let's use your blood to put an end to this nuisance."



Saya's blood still covered the blade of the katana he held in an underhand grip. To the Schiff, it was deadlier than any poison.

"No! . . . Get away!"

Pinned to the ground by her right hand, Saya had no other way to help.

"Waa!"

". . . Lulu!"

James swung his arm, but was thwarted by Lulu's ax. Lulu's small form looked like a plush doll as she flew through the air and crashed into a wooden fence.

As a Schiff, Lulu should have just about matched James's physical strength, but the vast weight difference meant she took the brunt of the impact. Saya fully realized that being small was a disadvantage when fighting Chevaliers.

"Watch what we do with lab rats who outlive their usefulness."

Saya shivered at the sadistic tone in James's voice.

As splinters from the fence sprinkled down to the ground, James held the tip of Saya's sword over Lulu's head.

Just as James was about to strike, something held him back. The tip of the katana froze, inches from Lulu.

"What in the . . . ?"

Something had blocked James's arm. The impact caused James's torso to reel back, and the pavement buckled as he was forced to take several steps backward.

Feeling her hand freed, Saya rolled to her feet before catching a glimpse of Lulu's savior.

It was a lone young man.

His black suit was torn and stained with blood and dirt. His matted hair was the color of the sun, and the expression on his face was calm and collected, his eyes glistening with resolve.

Solomon Goldsmith.

James's armored body shook with laughter.

"What is this? You are Diva's Chevalier. How can you defend her enemy?"

"Even if there is no reward, I will serve as Saya's Chevalier."

Beneath Solomon's calm delivery lay a core of iron resolve. He turned and smiled faintly. For a moment, his eyes met Saya's.

It was clear that he was completely emaciated. His lips were blue, and his pale skin looked almost translucent. Still, there was a transcendent beauty to his haggard form.

"Saya, I have found something more meaningful than any bond of blood. From now on, I am your Chevalier."

Solomon raised his head again, and then in one fluid motion turned back to look at James.

James knocked Solomon back and once again lunged in as if to strike, but Solomon again rose to block the armored Chevalier. Still, it was easy to see that Solomon was at a disadvantage.

James, too, recognized his brother's weakness.

"Your skills seem a bit dull. Do you really think you can face me, with hardly enough blood to stand?"

In reply, Solomon clamped down harder on James's wrist as his hand turned into a claw. James cried out in pain, and Saya's sword spun out of his hand and clattered to the ground.

As James staggered back, Solomon, too, retreated to Saya's

side. His right hand changed again, this time into a familiar silvery blade.

James sneered. "The noble knight, protecting his mistress. No, I don't think that's how this story goes." He arched back, and from his chest flew a flurry of red spikes.

Solomon sprung forward, weaving between the arrows, scoring James's hard carapace again and again with his blade until the monstrous Chevalier sent him sprawling with a single savage blow of his claw.

James turned toward Saya. Even if she could reach her sword in time, there were no cracks in his armor—no weak spot where her blade could find purchase. And soon, he would be on her, and—

—with a gut-wrenching crunch, a red fissure opened across James's armored face. Saya squinted in confusion. Had one of Solomon's strikes finally penetrated his armor?

Instead of closing, the marks grew longer and wider, a crystalline web spreading across James's head and neck.

It was Lulu who recognized them for what they were.

"Thorn."

So the blood of the Chevalier had not been enough to conquer the curse of the "lab rats" he had scorned.

"Saya!"

As he called her name, Solomon threw the katana, and Saya reached up to catch it, squeezing the handle with all her strength.

"Hagi . . . !" She could hear the rubble shift and move, and then, behind her, she saw his wings spread wide. He circled once, testing his tattered wings, and as he swooped down, Saya

grabbed his wrist and let him carry her high into the night sky. The wind beat against her cheeks as Hagi carried her higher than the roof of their apartment building.

She let go.

The sound of the wind roared in her ears as she hurtled down toward James.

"—Hyaaa!"

The blade of her sword slipped into the center of his Thorn-cracked skull, through exoskeleton and brain and deep into his spinal column. Saya wrenched the sword back up, landing like a ballerina.

Chiropterans were almost immortal, but when death possessed them the journey was short.

By the time Saya's knees collapsed under her, James's body had already turned to grayish stone.

"... Mama ..."

The onyx Chevalier crumbled to sand.

Solomon had tried to step forward and catch Saya as she fell, but before that Hagi beat him to his master.

"..."

Hagi held Saya's shoulders, supporting her like a delicate piece of blown glass, and she crumpled gratefully into his arms. Solomon looked at them silently.

He felt no hatred.

Hagi was Saya's Chevalier. He loved her just as Solomon did, and protected her.

He was the Chevalier she wanted, and he served his queen at her side.

But it wasn't the same for Solomon.

He didn't receive that from Saya. He chose on his own to dedicate his life to her. But winning her love and attention was no longer important to him.

Solomon's soul was dedicated to Saya. That was his wish. Even if he received no reward, just knowing he was a part of Saya's strength was enough to make him happy.

Solomon stepped toward Saya, holding his left hand over his chest. He had known the second the sword had fallen from James's hand, when he had felt it bite into his shoulder, what had happened. Already, the blood from her blade was hardening his skin and muscles, crystallizing bones. His weakened state had been a blessing as well as a curse—that he had so little blood left had slowed the spreading crystallization long enough to let him finish the fight.

"Solomon . . ."

He knelt before her, keeping one hand over the wound in his chest as he took her hand with his other and brought it to his lips. Her eyes seemed sad, and he wondered if she had guessed what he was hiding.

*Saya . . . smile for me. You are the most beautiful when you are happy.*

Solomon's lips curled into a grin in order to keep the tears from flowing from Saya's eyes.

"Anytime you need help, just call my name . . ."

He needed to get away from Saya's gaze before his body broke apart.

"Solomon . . .!"

She tried to rush to him, but her legs gave out, and Hagi supported her once again.

This time, Solomon was relieved Saya didn't have the strength to follow him.

He felt the muscles in his legs start to stiffen as he walked one step at a time into the night. He would not look back.

"He is your Chevalier. You should be proud . . ." Hagi spoke quietly as Solomon turned the corner.

With Solomon gone, Hagi would protect her.

Solomon's right arm broke off at the elbow.

It hit the ground and the sparkling pieces of crystal might have looked like crimson snow.

Solomon didn't look down, but continued walking forward.

He pushed on, with Saya's voice still echoing behind him.

"Solomon . . . Solomon!"

Solomon smiled as he went forward into the night.



TICKETS HAD SOLD out the day they went on sale—a rare event for a first-time performer at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Now, patrons packed the grand structure, from the ground floor to the fifth tier, filling all 3,800 seats. More had meandered in during the intermission, and now the standing area, too, was full to bursting.

The opera, Puccini's *Tosca*, was over. But today's program wasn't. And after the curtain fell, not a single guest got up from their seats to exit. Instead, they waited with bated breath for the highly anticipated debut of a promising new singer.

"It's just about time." As he looked down at the audience from the producer's box, Nathan's voice was tight with excitement.

Anshel, too, could scarcely contain himself. "By the end of this night, we will have opened a new chapter in history."

The future of the entire world would bend before Diva.

Anshel would have preferred to watch the spectacle from the royal box seats, but that wasn't possible. Without fail, she would come, and he would be ready.



Tonight, Anshel's century of work on the Delta Project would come to fruition, and at the same time, the curtains would close on the life of Saya Otonashi.

"Our new history . . . That's nonsense."

"What are you saying?" Anshel turned to Nathan in shock.

"Diva and the world are not playthings to satisfy your curiosity. All the world is Diva's stage. That was decided even before she was born."

"You say it like you were there . . ." Anshel laughed scornfully. When had his little brother so brazenly forgotten his place?

Nathan shrugged. "But I was."

Anshel's brow wrinkled as Nathan walked past him and lifted the baby basket resting on a seat.

"Saya and Diva's mother was a Chiropteran queen. Did it really never occur to you that she, too, would have had a Chevalier?"

" . . . "

Anshel had seen Nathan Mahler receive Diva's blood, seen him reborn as Diva's seventh Chevalier. There was no doubt he was Diva's son and her knight.

But Chiropterans could mimic others. And who knew how the blood of a queen's Chevalier would respond to the blood of her daughter?

Was the Nathan Mahler who stood before Anshel even the same one who had received Diva's blood?

Without indicating his doubts, Anshel looked down into the baby basket. The queens of the new world still slept soundly in their cocoons.

Nathan spoke again. "I will take the children to watch from below. To see how your story unravels. As a member of the audience."

He was saying he wasn't going to help.

Nathan walked behind a thick, gold-embroidered curtain and down the corridor. Anshel didn't try to stop him.

Grigori, Martin, Karl, James, Solomon, and now Nathan.

Six brothers gone.

Only one was left: Diva's adoptive father and first knight, Anshel Goldsmith.

But Saya was nearing her sleep, and in her present state, one would be more than enough.

Anshel left the VIP section.

The performance was about to begin.

Joel kept his promise to Anshel.

At the party at Nathan's house, he had declared he would purchase his own tickets, and he had done just that.

The ground floor, center, would have been the best place to both see and hear the opera, but tonight Joel felt it was better to be in a less conspicuous position.

Kai unbuttoned the jacket of his tuxedo and loosened his tie. He likely wasn't accustomed to such formal wear, but he had other reasons to be nervous as well.

"Seriously, no one is going home . . ."

Even here, Cinq Flèches products with Base D were being distributed and probably eaten by audience members. To

keep any sleeping monsters from waking up, Diva's song must be stopped.

"The first performance ever at the Metro Opera was *Faust* in 1883. Tonight everyone is waiting to see the results of the gamble made by Mephistopheles."

Most of his companions ignored the facts Okamura was rattling off. The journalist was showing off to combat his nervousness, which was compounded by his ill-fitting tuxedo.

"In 1883 . . . the same year as that tragic event."

Sitting in his wheelchair, Joel rubbed the etched pattern on his pocket watch with his fingers.

On that day, Diva had been released from the tower at the Zoo and had begun to spread her seed across the world.

Saya blamed herself for this. She had released Diva from her prison cell, only to see her newfound sister hurt and destroy everything Saya had loved.

But Saya had more than made up for any mistakes she had made. She had been fighting for over a hundred years. She had suffered the pain of a normal person's death many times over, but she had never given up or run away from the fight.

"It doesn't make any difference." Kai spoke up for the first time. "Saya will defeat her. And then we'll go home, to Okinawa."

Then they would reopen Omoro and live together like they had when George and Riku were still alive.

To keep that promise alive, they must finish this tonight.

"Where's Diva?"

"It doesn't appear she has arrived yet." It was David who answered Joel's question.

Louis and Lulu were stationed at the entrance to the parking garage. They were to contact David as soon as they saw Diva arrive.

The intermission was over. Diva was late.

Kai stepped out to the corridor.

Saya was slumped down on an ottoman. She wore an evening gown, and her limbs looked soft and fragile.

Saya had fainted after finishing off James, and she hadn't opened her eyes again for a full day. It was only then that Kai had learned about the long hibernation that was approaching.

Thinking of how hard Saya beat herself up while pushing her body right to the brink made Kai grit his teeth. He couldn't forgive himself for not noticing it sooner.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah . . . fine."

Saya blocked the light from her eyes with the palm of her hand and grinned.

That smiling face pained Kai.

Even when she was hurting, she forced herself to smile. To her, it was part of protecting others.

"We still have time. Rest. I'll get you something to drink." Kai, too, forced a smile. He didn't want to burden her anymore.

As she closed her eyes again, Kai turned to Hagi, who was standing nearby, and said, in a voice too low for Saya to hear, "We gotta talk."

Hagi said nothing. He glanced at Saya, then followed Kai.

After turning a corner in the corridor, Kai grabbed Hagi's arm. "What are you hiding?"

"Hiding?"

"About Saya."

Kai's tone was strong, but not angry. His initial mistrust of Hagi had passed long ago. Hagi was part of the team, Saya's protector, and a trusted friend.

But this was bigger than either of them.

"The sleep that is coming—you weren't even going to tell us, and she's getting weaker by the minute . . . She can't heal as quickly . . . Can she really fight?"

*And what else haven't you told us about?*

"Saya wishes to fight."

"No she doesn't!" Kai punched the wall.

Lowering his voice so that she wouldn't overhear, Kai went on. "Saya doesn't . . . That's not what she wants. It's just that there's no one else who can do it . . . kill Diva."

No sign of emotion appeared on Hagi's face.

Kai kept going. "I want to protect Saya . . . but I'm just a human. I can't help much in her fight against Diva or her Chevalier. So, you have to . . . You have to keep her safe." He stared at Hagi's face, searching for some kind of affirmation.

Hagi stared back impassively.

"You don't really want Saya to fight, do you? You don't want her to die, do you?" All Kai was asking was for Saya to be happy. Hagi wanted the same thing—of that, Kai was certain. It wasn't his words, but his actions in battle that proved it.

But Kai wanted to hear it come from his mouth.

If he could say those words, Kai would be able to trust him with Saya's future.

But Hagi's reply floored him.

"... What do you know about me?" The Chevalier's tone was cold, but Kai could see the pain and turmoil brewing behind his eyes.

"... Excuse me." Hagi's voice had returned to its carefully even tone. He turned away, his face inscrutable.

Kai dropped his hand from Hagi's shoulder and watched the tall man walk back to where Saya was sleeping.

"Diva's limo was just seen at the entrance."

David stepped from the box seats to tell them. It had been several minutes since Kai and Hagi had stepped away.

Saya had sensed her sister's arrival a few minutes before. Now, she rose to her feet. "Diva . . ."

"Saya, you must cut her down before she gets on stage."

"I know."

Saya lifted her sword and scabbard with her left hand.

*Give me strength, Father.*

She pressed her thumb to the red crystal embedded in the sword.

"... Saya." David stopped her as she started to leave.

"Yes."

"You know that you are our last hope. You're our one and only weapon against the Chiropterans."

He had said the same thing when they had first spoken in Okinawa.

"But you're also our friend. And we'll have your back. Always."

"David-san . . ."

Saya wasn't sure she'd ever seen this kind of hope on David's face before. Nothing was more important to him than his comrades, and now she had been included in that group.

The person who had killed his father.

"Give it your all, Saya." His words were the encouragement of a friend, not the order of a commanding officer.

George had said something very similar, way back when.

". . . I will!"

Her voice was quiet but confident, and she turned to head to the stairs.

That was when Hagi and Kai returned.

Saya froze.

". . ."

She wanted to say something, anything, to Kai, but the words wouldn't come.

It was because this was the end. And now, there was no time.

"Kai, what are you doing? Let's get to the rendezvous point."

"Huh . . . oh, yeah . . ."

David's warning snapped Kai out of his reverie.

In that instant Saya grasped Kai's hand.

Kai stopped and turned around, spilling his glass of ginger ale down the front of his tuxedo.

Saya pulled out a handkerchief from a pocket hidden in her skirt and pressed it against the spill on Kai's jacket.

It was the handkerchief she had borrowed from Riku when they were in Paris. She had planned to wash it, then return it, but she had never gotten the chance. Now, she slipped it into Kai's tuxedo's breast pocket.

Just as Kai opened his mouth to speak, Saya turned around.  
“Hagi, let’s go.”

“... If that is what you wish.”

Saya began walking.

She had only one wish: to kill the queen of the Chiropterans.

*No, not queen—queens.*

The chattering buzz from the audience was audible even backstage.

A figure in white slipped through the dim corridors. She was dressed in a sailor outfit, and she was alone.

There were two Chevaliers left. Either Anshel or Nathan should have been beside their queen, but Saya could sense neither of them.

She held her breath and carefully stalked her target, trying not to stir the air. Hagi followed silently.

Diva disappeared around a corner.

At the end of the long corridor was a double door. Diva must have gone in through there. Saya rushed ahead and caught it before it could close.

She ducked through the doorway, but her feet stopped as the interior of that space seemed to pull away from her like an illusion.

It was a giant, dark space.

The ceiling was very high, and Saya could see lighting and ropes above her. There were stage equipment, racks hanging with costumes, and large-scale sets to be used as backdrops.

Light trickled in between the thick curtains on the other side, telling Saya she was in the wings, just backstage.



"Welcome, Saya-neesama." The voice echoed through the darkness. "You're just in time for my show!"

"Diva!"

Diva stood with her back to the blackout curtain at the side of the stage. She wore Riku's face, and a thin smile curled at the edge of her lips.

Saya reached for her katana.

Just as she was about to unsheathe her blade, her vision became blurry and her limbs felt heavy. She struggled to focus her energy and stay conscious.

Right then Hagi dashed past Saya.

The bandage around his hand unraveled like a snake shedding its skin as his claws rushed toward Diva's neck.

But there was no spray of blood. Diva's image flickered out and reappeared in front of Saya.

"You look sleepy."

With a growl, Saya snapped the blade from its scabbard and struck. But Diva flickered again, this time reappearing behind Saya.

"But it's all right. Once you hear me sing, you'll be wide awake."

Saya spun around to a sound like a sudden rainstorm. No—it was applause. The curtain was rising on the final act of the evening. Saya watched, confused, as a second Diva—clad not in the simple sailor suit, but in an ornate gown—took her place on the stage.

"How can she be out there . . . ?"

"To wake up children all over the world," the Diva backstage hissed in her ear, and, as Saya struck at her again, the scarf

she had been wearing fell to her feet and she grew taller and darker until she had taken the form of Anshel Goldsmith.

Without a word, Hagi flew like a shadow, sliding behind Anshel.

But as he was about to snatch Anshel's heart through his back, Hagi's opponent disappeared from before his eyes. His claws sliced through Anshel's fading afterimage and stopped only centimeters from Saya's neck.

Hagi looked around until he saw Anshel standing next to the stage sets and he darted at him.

Anshel made no move to defend himself. Instead, he raised a hand, and lightning shot from his fingers, catching Hagi midair. The air filled with the metallic scent of ozone, and the smells of charred clothing and skin.

The ease with which Anshel wielded his power, the limitless potential in his every move, sent a chill through Saya's body.

"Hagi . . . !"

Anshel was still pouring voltage into Hagi's body—enough to kill any number of ordinary men. However, keeping Hagi from moving hardly seemed to distract the elder Chevalier.

Saya sprinted to Hagi's aid, but Anshel appeared between them, stopping her with one hand. He grabbed Saya by the throat with his other hand and forcibly directed her head.

"Look. Diva's song is starting."

The nervous excitement of the audience felt like a physical presence in the air.

"I owe you my thanks, Saya . . . After all, it was you who set my Diva free, all those years ago . . ."

"And it was a terrible mistake!"

Anshel nodded. "A mistake . . . Yes."

Saya looked up at him, confused, as he went on. "If you hadn't opened the door, she would have remained mine, and mine alone, forever."

He looked toward the figure on the stage, his face full of longing and regret.

"But you opened the door and set her free to roam the world . . . searching for a place where she might belong. And even then . . . even after sharing her blood, following her for all these years . . . the more time I spend near her, the more I want . . ."

He trailed off as Diva began to sing.

"She started!"

David responded to Kai's exclamation through clenched jaws.

"Saya didn't make it in time . . . It can't be helped. At least we can stop it from being broadcast."

He spoke into the wireless mike hidden in his sleeve.

"Louis, set off the bombs."

Explosives had been set at broadcast relay stations by Red Shield agents in every major country in the world. With a single push of a button on Louis's laptop the signal was sent, detonating relay stations around the world.

David listened silently for a moment, then spoke into his sleeve again.

"To the army satellite . . . ?"

David stopped in his tracks. Kai could hear the strain in David's voice and see how hard he was trying to keep his face

calm. He couldn't hear what Louis was telling David from the other end of the radio, but it clearly wasn't good news.

"... What happened?"

"We failed."

David's answer was short, but it was enough to instill fear into Kai.

"Don't tell me ... The bombs didn't go off?"

"No. All the explosions went off according to plan. All of the relay stations are offline."

Had they found some other means of rerouting the broadcast? Kai broke into a cold sweat.

"Then what is it?"

"They are using a military satellite to broadcast directly from the source."

They must have prepared a backup dish, which had taken over when the signal from the relay station on Staten Island had been disrupted. The broadcast must have been coming from the Met itself—or from a broadcast van nearby.

"What are we going to do ... ?"

"Take out the OB van?"

David and Kai walked as fast as they could without drawing attention out the main entrance. When they got to the door, they broke into a sprint.

There weren't many pedestrians around, but the media seemed to have set up camp around the fountain outside. A gauntlet of cameras filmed reporters against the backdrop of the opera house.

"Over here!"

Hidden in the shadow of his van, Louis waved an arm.

Near the entrance to the underground garage, they could see three vans furnished with satellite dishes and guarded by what looked like SWAT teams.

Kai clicked his tongue.

"Now what, David? We don't have time."

Red Shield members could strike against Chiropterans at will, but these were little more than bystanders, following orders in the line of duty. They couldn't mow them down in cold blood.

If they could use the element of surprise to confuse them they might have had a chance, but the police had positioned themselves carefully, and there was no way to sneak up on them.

"Leave it to me."

"Huh? Hey!"

Before Kai could stop her, Lulu bolted like a beast.

"Don't kill anyone!" Kai rushed after her, and Louis and David followed him toward the "No Entry" barriers surrounding the vans, but there had been no need to rush.

When they got near the front of the OB vans, they could see about ten officers, dressed in full riot gear, sprawled out on the ground. The rise and fall of their vests indicated that they were still breathing.

"I didn't kill them." With her ax resting on her shoulder, Lulu lifted her head in pride.

"You were a big help." Louis patted her lightly on the head and Lulu blushed and smiled. Kai made a note to thank her later—for now, there wasn't time for more than a nod and a smile.

The door to the first van wasn't locked. Kai burst in, and the director and techs inside stared, wide eyed.

"Get out! Now!"

Kai raised his gun as he yelled his orders. The director raised up his hands, and the other technicians pulled off their headphones and filed after him out of the van. Once they were clear, Kai unloaded his Colt into the van's equipment.

By the time he was finished, smoke was pouring from the other two vans as well. Louis and David had worked fast.

"It looks like we were able to cut off the satellite transmission, but—"

"David!"

Kai was just replacing the cartridge in his pistol when, one by one, the bodies of the fallen SWAT officers began to change.

The bullets he fired through the first Chiropteran's shoulder sent pieces of flesh flying everywhere, but Kai's gun was still loaded with Lugers, which lacked the stopping power of the more powerful igniters.

The Chiropteran swung its thick arm toward David's head.

David rolled across the ground and turned, firing his magnum.

Blood poured from the bullet holes in the monster's skin, and it reeled backwards as the silver flash of Lulu's battle-ax severed its neck.

Cutting off the satellite transmission had stopped the transformations around the world, but the opera house itself would still be swarming with Chiropterans.

"I'm going back to make sure Joel is OK."

"Wait. You're hurt."

David's left sleeve was soaked in blood. He must have been cut by the Chiropteran's claws.

Kai took the handkerchief he borrowed from Saya out of his pocket, intending to twist it into a tourniquet, when a metallic clank by his feet stopped his hands.

It was a pink key.

The key to Omoro Kai had given to Saya.

Had she hidden it in the handkerchief? No, somehow they must have gotten mixed up in her pocket, Kai told himself. Saya was always forgetting and misplacing things.

Kai recalled the sensation of Saya squeezing his hand when they separated in the corridor.

What had she been trying to tell him?

Anxiety grew in Kai's chest.

"Louis, please take care of David."

Kai passed the handkerchief to Louis and ran back into the rear entrance of the opera house.

"What in the hell is going on here?"

"I-I am not sure . . ." Van Argeno stammered in response to Secretary Grant's angry question.

As far as Van knew, the night was nothing more than a celebration of the success of the Delta Project, and a chance for Anshel to show off his pet, Diva, and cement the friendship between Cinq Flèches and the United States government.

There was nothing friendly about the spectacle they were witnessing from their box seats.

A few minutes earlier, Diva had begun her song to resounding applause. Even Secretary Grant had commented on the beauty

of her voice. But then, the screams had started as members of the audience had mutated and begun to attack their fellow spectators.

"What is this? How could this happen?" Van demanded of the researcher to his right. But the man was just as perplexed.

Van had to scold his subordinate to save face in front of Grant, but he knew that in the end any blame would come to rest squarely at his own feet. Since the Cinq Flèches research department had lost Collins and Julia, no one understood Base D and SZN better than Van.

Secretary Brett, sitting to Van's left, was even less inclined than her colleague to be forgiving of Van's delicate position.

"Your company is the one that is in charge of manufacturing those *things*, is it not? Releasing these within America's borders is a grievous breach of contract—no, an act of outright aggression!"

"Please, Madame Secretary—we certainly had no intention of—" Van struggled to construct an excuse, but his voice was cut short as Brett's head dropped low and she began to cough.

At first, Van thought she was simply overwhelmed by the scene unfolding below them. Like Van, Brett had seen footage of Delta Project experiments on video screens, but it was much more intense firsthand, accompanied by the stench of blood and the screams of the dying.

But death was closer to Van than he thought.

The back of Brett's suit suddenly split open, revealing ashy brown skin and huge, flexing muscles.

The creature that, until a minute before, had been his White House colleague locked her red eyes onto Grant.



The Secret Service agents standing behind them fired round after round into Brett's head. Blood sprayed across Van's face, staining his suit and coating his glasses.

"Unph . . ."

Van froze as the large body of the Chiropteran slumped over the banister and fell down to the audience below.

"It's a damn shame. She was very talented." Grant spoke remarkably frankly as he stood from his seat.

"Wh-where are you going?"

"Back to Washington. And then, I will be having a very long conversation with your Mr. Goldsmith."

With his armed guards to his front and rear, Grant quickly exited the box seats. Van scrambled after them. If he were going to get out of this alive, his best bet would be Grant's well-armed security.

With the Secret Service agents in tow, the group hurried toward a service elevator. One of the agents produced a key, and Van watched as the lights above the door tracked the elevator's lumbering progress.

"This has gone beyond what the Corpse Corps can handle. Contact the air force. Prepare Option D."

Just as Grant snapped the order to one of the agents, the door opened.

As the agents looked on, Grant stepped into the elevator.

Van prepared to follow, but one of the agents blocked his way.

"What's this . . . ?"

"You are not U.S. government personnel. Your safety is not part of our directive. You need to find your own escape route."

With those cruel words Grant took a pistol from one of the agents and tossed it on the carpet at Van's feet.

"You can't be . . . !" Van clawed at the door, trying to open it. He heard a long, low growl as a bullet-riddled Chiropteran in the hallway behind him suddenly lifted its head.

Drops of saliva fell from its bloodstained mouth. The beast crawled forward, then stabbed its claws into the wall to pull itself to its feet.

Van did not run away.

His feet wouldn't move. Somehow, without directive from his brain, his fingers fumbled to unwrap a last piece of candy and slip it between his shaking lips.

He tasted its sweetness.

Then, sounds of gunfire filled the corridor.

The shots went through the Chiropteran's head, and once again, the great beast toppled over.

The researcher who had saved him had worked under Van for years, following him from the nature conservatory in Okinawa to France, England, and now America. Vance had no idea where the man had found the gun, or how he had learned where to shoot one, but he had never been happier to see him.

"I didn't know you could—"

"I'm getting out of here. If you want to live, come with me."

The tone of his voice was completely the opposite of anything Van had ever heard from him before. It was not the way a subordinate should speak to a superior, but now wasn't the time to worry about etiquette. Van followed him down the hall.

From the wings, Saya couldn't see the audience, but she could hear the screams and gunshots and the tearing of bones and flesh, and she could sense the Chiropterans.

Behind her, Anshel stroked his beard and sighed contentedly.

Saya glared up at him. "You have to stop this!"

"Diva's children can be born into a world full of Chiropterans. What will Diva do then? That's what I want to see."

"That's the only reason why . . . ?"

Anshel's so-called *love* for Diva was hopelessly tangled with his fascination for the rare creature he had discovered.

He wasn't doing this for love, or to make Diva happy. Everything he had done—every life his projects had cost, every human transformed into a monster, the creation and deaths of the Schiff—had been sacrifices not to love, but to *curiosity*.

Anshel laughed. "Do you know what runs through every battlefield, Saya?"

She stared at him in cold horror as he answered his own question. "Blood, sweat, tears, and money. I have not started this war. All I have done is help the humans along the path they were already walking—and use their battles for my own ends."

"No! You used to be a human! How can you even think—"

Anshel laughed again. "You fascinate me. A full-blooded Chiropteran queen, and yet you persist in this charade of humanity, in pretending there's a place among them for the likes of you."

Saya's voice was quiet but firm. "No," she said. "I know what I am. Chiropterans are abominations. We don't belong in this world at all. This ends tonight."

As she spoke, a metallic flash parted the air between Saya and Anshel, grazing the Chevalier's cheek. She heard Hagi's whisper in her ear.

"Saya, go. I will finish here."

"Still putting up a fight? A true servant to his master." Anshel spat out his reply in disgust, ignoring the blood on his face.

Hagi ran at Anshel again. Anshel opened his mouth, pushing Hagi back with the power of his exhalation. Hagi pushed on toward him, but his eyes were on Saya, and she could read the words his lips formed against the roaring of the wind.

"Saya. Fight."

He was buying her the time she needed to reach Diva.

With a last desperate glance at her Chevalier, Saya turned on her heels and sprinted toward her goal.

The stage was bathed in a beautiful bright light, blinding Saya even as she reeled from the cloying stench of blood.

"Welcome, Saya." Diva—the real Diva, this time—called down to her. "You're here to kill me, aren't you?"

Seeing Riku's face and hearing his voice caused Saya's heart to skip a beat. But she couldn't afford to get sentimental now.

Slowly, she raised her katana.

"Our mere existence has brought so much misery to the world."

As Saya drew the blade across her hand, her mind rushed unbidden to George and Riku, now nothing more than shards of stone.

Forest and Mui, transformed into Chiropterans.

Clarence, Spencer, Elizaveta—all the agents who had died carrying out their missions.

Moses, Aurélien, and the other Schiff, born with Death already waiting to take them away.

David's father, and the other Red Shield agents who had died by Saya's hand.

The first Joel, who had died by Diva's.

And the countless others who had died by—or for the sake of—the sisters.

Not one more needed to die.

"I have to end this."

Her blade was painted a brilliant scarlet, wet and sparkling in the light. Saya pointed the tip of her katana at her younger sister's head.

Diva looked confused, like a child scolded for something it hadn't known was wrong. "Isn't there another way? I don't understand humans, and they don't understand us, either."

"That isn't true." Saya's voice was full of passion. "They have been my friends and my family. Even though we weren't related by blood, even though they knew I was a Chiropteran, Riku was my little brother, and my father . . . My father was still my father."

"Oh, that's right! Saya-neechan is a Chiropteran!" The surprised face and excited voice were Riku's. Saya's hands trembled.

*No. That isn't Riku.*

"Ha! I surprised you!" The glee in Diva's voice was the sadistic innocence of a child.

Saya's rage dissolved into confusion. What was Diva playing at? "I don't understand you," she whispered.

Diva's face fell. "Why not? We were born from the same mother, weren't we? Why am I the one you can't understand?"

"Onesama, it isn't fair. You're the one who gets to be with humans, you get to be loved, and only you get to be happy, and only you get to have fun . . ."

Saya watched her sister. Her rage was gone, replaced by a deep sorrow. "Diva . . ." she whispered.

A fuse crackled and blew, and the stage was swathed in darkness. As the lights flickered back on, Saya saw that Diva no longer resembled Riku. Now, she was Saya's reflection, the sister she had met through the bars of that long-ago tower. And she held a naked rapier in her right hand.

"You were the one who set me free from that tower." Diva spoke as if she had read Saya's thoughts. Her voice had lost any hint of Riku's plaintive lilt.

"And from that day on, I have allowed myself to survive only so that I could someday kill you."

Diva shrugged and smiled.

In a mock duelist's salute, she brought the rapier before her face, almost close enough to kiss it, then scraped its tip along the stage.

Saya raised her katana.

Mao had never eaten Cinq Flèches chocolate or candy. But even without the influence of Base D, seeing Diva on the stage made her ill.

Mao knew how much Saya and Kai had cared about Riku, and she had seen his kindness firsthand. Seeing Diva wearing his face . . .

Finally, the broadcast flickered out, replaced by a message about Technical Difficulties. Mao stood up and shouted for joy.

"They did it! Mission complete!"

"They sure did. But it took too long." Julia, sitting beside her, was more pragmatic.

According to the communication from Louis, there had been a change in the plan, which had delayed them in disrupting the live broadcast signal. As Julia pointed out, they still had no idea what the delay might have cost them.

Mao bit her lip as she changed the channel.

"The news is the same everywhere."

Chiropterans had been spotted in New York, in numbers that dwarfed the previous outbreak in London.

"It's complicated info, and we haven't received a report from the scene, but the Department of Defense has issued a warning and isn't letting anyone out." As she spoke, Julia was punching keys on her laptop, hunting frantically for more information.

Mao walked over to the window.

The street had grown noisy. And what Mao saw when she looked down made her jaw muscles clench.

"This can't be happening . . ."

Mangled bodies lay in puddles of blood in the street. Around them, creatures loped, stopping to tear at the corpses' flesh or lap up their blood. Chiropterans.

"Julia, there are monsters down there!"

Julia jumped to her feet, knocking her papers to the floor. She threw herself against the bookshelf on the wall, working it toward the door. "Help me!"

Seeing what Julia was trying to do, Mao quickly ran to Julia's side and helped her barricade the entrance. When they were done, Julia turned to Mao. In her hand was a semiautomatic revolver.

"We need to be ready for the worst."

Mao blanched. She had never even pointed a bamboo kendo stick or a kitchen knife at another person, let alone fired a gun. And now she was expected to fight Chiropterans?

It wasn't that she didn't want to. Mao was willing to get her hands dirty. She was a part of Red Shield, but this wasn't her fight. All she wanted was for it to end, so they could all go back to Okinawa together.

"... I guess we don't have a choice. Let's get 'em!"

Mao let out a deep breath and took the pistol in her hand. She was surprised by how heavy it was.

*Not one of those bastards is coming in here!*

Stuffing the gun into the waistband of her skirt, she scanned the room for anything that could still be added to the barricade. Suddenly, something on the television caught her eye.

"Isn't that ..."

The camera focused in on a headless monster lying on the ground. Its head had rolled a few feet away.

It looked like Harlem. In the middle of the chaos in front of a record shop was a pile of Chiropteran bodies.



The camera pulled back to reveal who was responsible for the meaty stack of monsters.

Corpse Corps.

The irony was stunning. Mao doubted the politicians who had spread rumors of SZN and plotted to unleash Chiropterans on other countries before sweeping in to the rescue had ever expected to use the Corpse Corps in the middle of New York City.

Dagger after dagger flew through the air, but none of them found its mark.

Anshel chuckled, his laugh echoing through the cavernous backstage room.

"Hagi. I wonder if you ever noticed how much I used to hate you."

Hagi watched him silently. Anshel was beginning to show the strain of their fight: his usually neat hair had fallen out of place, and his voice was harsh and loud.

"No, honestly, I envied you: Diva's destined bridegroom. But now that Diva is a mother, I have nothing left for you but scorn. You've outlived your use. You're not even worth the loaf of bread I paid your parents for you." Anshel laughed again.

"Did you know that, Hagi? You cost me a loaf of bread. It's a thought that has brought me a lot of pleasure over the years." His voice hardened. "And I'm thankful for that. What do you have to be thankful for?"

Hagi responded without pausing, his voice quiet and certain. "I am thankful to you—or to the person you once were—and to Joel, for introducing me to Saya."

For that, all of Anshel's scorn, all of the fear and the pain and the century of fighting—standing by Saya's side had made it all worthwhile.

Hagi spread his wings.

"Going all out, I see."

Anshel's lips curled into a smile.

"Fine by me."

He removed the silver ring from his bony middle finger and dropped it in his jacket pocket.

And then, Anshel changed.

Giant, leathery wings framed a body armored with huge black scales and an elongated head.

Fiery breath blew between Anshel's fangs, and the claws of his reptilian legs scratched the floor below.

"You know, I think I am going to enjoy this."

Anshel's mouth opened wide and electricity arced between his jaws. He took a deep breath, then roared.

Hagi jumped to the side a moment too late. The blast threw him through the wall and sent plaster and metal raining down.

Another ball of lightning lit a path through the smoke and dust as it skimmed the floor before crashing into Hagi.

"Gwaa . . ."

The pain of the blast was enough to make even the stoic Chevalier cry out. Anshel closed in and drove his right arm into Hagi's solar plexus.

Hagi spat blood as Anshel slammed his still-convulsing body spine first into the ceiling. Metal groaned and wood beams splintered while glass from the lights rained down around them.

They continued up though each floor and into the next ceiling, until they finally broke through the roof and into the night sky.

Hagi knew he couldn't match Anshel head to head, so he had to count on his greater maneuverability. He darted between skyscrapers, hugging the walls and ducking around corners. After a moment, a blast of air pulverized the wall behind him. Anshel himself soon followed.

There was smoke where his blast had hit, but no Hagi.

*Up.*

Like a fighter pilot in a dogfight, Hagi had swept in a backwards arc that ended behind Anshel's shoulder. The tenacious scales covering the back of the dragon were strong, but so were the claws Hagi swung.

"Quite cunning!"

Anshel dodged the strike, dropping and then rising again like an arrow. When he had cleared the massing stormclouds, he paused in midair. Droplets of water condensed on his skin as he flexed and arched his neck, and a sphere of pale blue lightning shot toward Hagi, who was only now rising through the thick clouds.

Hagi deftly did a full turn in the air and dropped down again, swiping the corner of a building and sending a stone gargoyle tumbling to the street with a resounding crash.

Anshel seemed happy to have a little more distance between he and his enemy. He hung back, sending blast after blast of

air at Hagi, who picked up speed as he zigzagged between the deadly strikes.

"You'll need more than speed to stop me!"

As Hagi pressed upward, Anshel turned and dove down toward him. A mass of scales and sinew slammed Hagi into the building behind him. He could feel his ribs snap like brittle twigs under Anshel's weight, as dark clouds swallowed the last of the stars in the sky and a clap of thunder tore through the humid air.

"Next I'll crush your heart."

Hagi swiped at him in vain as Anshel reared back again and opened his jaws and blasted with a wall of solid force.

Ignoring the tremendous pressure and the pain of his shattered ribs, Hagi pushed forward. His breath rattled from his lungs with a bestial growl.

Anshel could only watch in amazement as Hagi broke through the wall and grabbed Anshel's shoulder with his right hand, digging his claws deep into the muscle.

The shock and sudden pain broke Anshel's concentration, and as the wall dissolved, Hagi ripped Anshel's wing away with a single brutal twist of his arm. The giant beast began to lose lift and sink back toward the earth.

But Anshel wasn't going to fall without a fight. He swung back his arm—thicker and stronger than the slender body still clinging to his shoulder—and shredded his claws through one of Hagi's own wings.

Now neither of them would be able to remain in the sky.

Hagi took his injury in stride and carefully shifted his weight. Now, Anshel's larger body was between Hagi and the ground.

Anshel searched Hagi's face for fear or pain but found only calm resolve.

He answered it with a sneer. "Do you really think the impact will be enough to kill me?"

The skyscrapers rushed closer, and suddenly, Hagi fell away. Anshel twisted his face to look down as what felt like an enormous spear pierced his spine.

"Gya . . . !"

It tore through skin and bone, pulverizing organs and tissue, and leaving Anshel pinned like a beetle under glass.

It was the spire on the top of a skyscraper. *A lightning rod.*

"It'll take . . . more than this . . ."

Anshel grasped the lightning rod with both hands. The pain was blinding, but the wound itself wouldn't be mortal. Chiropterans were made of sterner stuff than that—aside from the blood of a rival queen, only beheading or total immolation would kill a Chevalier.

Anshel began to drag himself up the pole.

Hagi stood at the edge of the rooftop, his tattered wing trailing behind him. Anshel chuckled to himself in spite of his pain.

Thunder rumbled in the dark clouds above.

The next moment Anshel's vision went completely white.

" . . . "

There was no sound. No pain.

It felt like the air had shattered into a million pieces as his body was consumed by the bolt.

Like the filament in a light bulb, Anshel Goldsmith's consciousness flared for a moment, then went dark.



There were almost no living people remaining in the ground-floor seating.

Most of them had escaped from the opera house, and the lifeless bodies of those who couldn't were now strewn about the bloody floor and seats.

The only things moving were the Chiropterans, still feasting on those corpses.

Saya ignored them.

After just two or three strikes, she could already feel her body weakening.

Diva could wield her light blade one-handed, but even with both hands on her own grip, Saya struggled to block her sister's easy swings.

"What's the matter, Oneesama? Aren't you going to kill me?"

Diva had torn off the skirt of her long dress to free her legs, and the hem hung in tatters.

The same was true of Saya's evening gown.

Diva was a novice at swordfighting. Had it been a simple contest of skill, Saya would have won easily. But Saya's body and mind were sluggish, and the longer the battle stretched, the greater Diva's edge became.

"Hyaa!" Saya rushed at Diva, sword raised. Diva diverted the blow with a flick of her wrist, sliding her own blade toward Saya's chest. Now, Saya was on the defensive, as Diva struck again from below. For a moment, their blades locked, and with a yell, Saya threw Diva back.

She landed lightly, and Saya prepared to charge again. Again, Diva leapt into the air, and Saya's sword met nothing but air.

"That wasn't nice, Oneesama."

Diva laughed, her nose almost touching Saya's. Saya felt the tip of the blade scratch her throat as she arched back in shock.

Surely she would—

But before Diva could strike, a shock wave billowed through the building. Giant cracks opened in the stage, and rubble and plaster rained down from the ceiling.

"Wha—?!"

Diva flew backwards and disappeared among the falling lights and chunks of marble.

Saya had nowhere to retreat. She pressed her hand over her mouth to block out the dust and looked up.

"Hagi . . ."

She could feel him as he broke through floor after floor of the building. The other Chiropteran she sensed must have been Anshel.

"Don't get distracted, Oneesama."

Diva's beautiful voice resounded from the spreading smoke.

"Let the Chevaliers keep each other entertained. You and I have more important things to do."

Saya turned toward the sound as Diva dove down from the scaffolding, bringing a chunk of the ceiling with her.

Their blades clashed in midair.

The sparks flew as the two passed each other, but Saya was at a disadvantage, struggling to catch her footing in the rubble as chunks of the ceiling continued to rain down on her.

Through the crumbling plaster, she could see twisted steel girders, and above them, a clouded, starless sky.

She could hear the sound of thunder. It would probably begin to rain soon.

As the smoke and dust settled, she could finally make out Diva, standing at the other end of the stage. She was holding her sword loosely by her side, its tip resting on the ground.

"Onesama, you said Chiropterans can't be allowed to live in this world, didn't you?"

Saya struggled to regain her balance and tightened her grip on her katana.

Diva's voice was serious, and her face had lost its mocking grin as she turned to look at something in the audience.

"So does that mean you will kill them, too?"

In the front row of the empty gallery sat Nathan. Beside him was a bassinet.

Diva's face softened. "Aren't they cute? My daughters . . ."

". . ."

*Riku's children.*

"So, Onesama, what do you plan to do?" Diva sounded genuinely curious.

Saya couldn't answer.

Her path was already decided. There was no need to justify it to Diva now.

"I have nothing more to say to you."

The blood on Saya's sword had already dried. She slid the palm of her left hand across the back of the blade.

"Fine." Something in Diva's voice had changed.



No, it was more than that.

Diva had become a mother. Before, Diva had had countless opportunities to kill Saya, but nothing had ever forced her hand. Until now, she had seen their battles as nothing but entertainment. She carried no hatred or murderous intent—she simply saw the battles as something for the two of them to share.

But now Diva was no longer just Saya's sister.

As a mother, she knew that any enemy of her children must be destroyed.

Saya could see the deadly tension on Diva's lips as her eyes followed the path of Saya's hand against the blade of her katana.

Thunder crashed again, and the opera house went black.

Anticipating a surprise attack, Saya's nerves vibrated with the tension in the air. She searched the dark for the sound of Diva's footfalls, the feel of her breath.

Slowly, the emergency lights came on.

Diva hadn't moved.

A sigh passed through her lips, and then she smiled.

"Saya-neesama!"

Diva charged.

At the same time, Saya dashed forward, her sword extended before her.

She felt a moment of resistance as her blade sunk into Diva's chest, and a flash of hot pain in her own belly as Diva's sword pierced through her gut and out her back.

Then, the familiar crackling in her ears, as blood turned to cold crystal.

"Onesama . . ."

One of Diva's arms cracked off at the shoulder and tumbled to the stage. Saya stared as it crumbled to dust.

Without mercy, the transformation continued. Diva's knees shattered beneath her, and she toppled to the floor.

Diva carefully turned her head, and Saya followed her eyes to the tall man who had joined them on the stage, the bassinet still in his hand.

"I do not intend to fight."

Numbly, Saya lowered her blade. He placed the two cocoons next to Diva's body.

"My . . . babies . . ."

Diva reached out with her remaining hand. A crystal smile played across her lips as her stiffening fingers stroked the cocoons, then cracked off and crumbled to the floor.

Nathan rested his hand gently on the remains of his queen's head.

"Poor Diva. All you wanted was a family of your own . . ."

Instead of a knight grieving for his patron, he sounded to Saya like a father consoling a frustrated daughter.

"Anshel never understood . . . he wouldn't let you out of his test tubes and mazes." He turned to Saya. "But in the end, she got her freedom—never realizing that the birth of her children had cost her blood its potency."

No . . .

Saya had watched as Diva's body crystallized. Until she heard Nathan's words, it had never occurred to her that the same thing wasn't happening to her.

Saya's dress was soaked in her own blood where Diva's sword had impaled her. But her flesh remained unchanged.

If Nathan was telling the truth, then bearing the children had fundamentally altered the make-up of Diva's blood, making it powerless against Saya's.

Saya had been saved by Diva's daughters.

The shell of Diva's body crumbled into mist as a gust of wind blew down from above.

"Hagi . . ."

The black-clad Chevalier dropped down through a tear in the high ceiling. He was limping, and one of his wings was gone, but he stood firmly by Saya's side.

Nathan looked up. "Then you must have defeated Anshel."

He walked across the stage and picked up Saya's katana.

Hagi dropped into a crouch, raising his clawed right hand.

"Saya, will you please kill me?" Nathan said.

It was the last thing Saya expected him to say.

"Now that Diva is dead, there is no more need for me to serve as her Chevalier. Please . . ."

Nathan offered the katana to Saya, handle first, and Saya accepted it without speaking.

What life could there be for a Chevalier who had lost his queen? Diva had been his life. Saya wondered if Hagi would feel the same way when she was dead.

Saya looked up to Hagi and he silently bowed his head.

She gripped the sword.

"... Good girl."



Nathan smiled as his body twisted and changed into its true Chiropteran form, his jaw lengthening and his arms and legs stretching into a form that, though monstrous, somehow retained the Chevalier's human grace.

Saya focused her energy onto a single upward slash.

Nathan's body split cleanly in two, and Saya watched the halves topple slowly backward until they were lost in the darkness beneath the stage.

Her body felt incredibly heavy.

Saya felt something cold and wet on her forehead. It had begun to rain. The drops fell through the holes in the roof, splattering on the stage, on the crystallized face of what had once been Diva.

Saya's little sister was dead.

Saya felt like there was a gaping hole where her heart should be.  
*She was my family.*

Their enmity had been no more than a twisted accident, a cruel joke of fate. If Saya had been the twin Joel had chosen to lock away, who was to say she would not have turned out just as Diva had? And in the past if she had had a stronger heart and more confidence . . . if she had loved Diva . . . maybe Diva wouldn't have had to die here today.

But Diva was dead. The battle was over. And her journey was at an end.

"... Saya."

To cover her from the cold rain soaking her shoulders, Hagi came from behind Saya and put his arms around her.

The warmth from his body began to melt something hard inside Saya.

She turned her head and looked up at him.

For a hundred years he had shown her his feelings not with words, but with his quiet presence, the look in his deep-set eyes. He had never left her side. His strength had allowed her to fight until the very end.

And he was still with her.

From the hole she felt in her heart flowed memory after memory.

She had no more words.

Saya could only cry.

She cried for the death of her sister, and out of relief that the burden she had been carrying had been lifted. She cried for everyone she had lost, for George, and Riku, and Joel. With the warmth of Hagi's body against her back, she cried for her own life and what it could have been.

The opera house was almost empty.

As David ran down the corridor to the VIP section where he had left Joel and Okamura, he passed only a handful of people—a few guards, and a uniformed police officer.

The Chiropterans seemed to be slowing down.

Most of the beasts had made their way outside and fought against the Corpse Corps and police forces, and eventually their cries had been all but silenced.

But there was someone at the top of the stairs. David reflexively drew his pistol.

It wasn't a Chiropteran.

But it wasn't a typical opera fan, either.

"Van Argeno . . ."

David spoke his name, making no effort to hide the scorn in his voice.

The Cinq Flèches CEO's expensive suit was stained with blood and dirt, and his face was streaked with sweat and tears. He was leaning against the wall as he pushed himself forward. When he saw the muzzle of the gun pointed at him, he started, and his already-terrified eyes grew even wider.

Beside him was a bespectacled man carrying a gun. His face looked familiar, but David couldn't place it. The armed men looked each other over suspiciously.

"You must be Red Shield's . . . Mr. David."

David's muscles tensed. He wasn't surprised that a Cinq Flèches goon knew the name Red Shield, but there was something off about this guy.

When the man with the glasses slipped his left hand into his suit, David began to press down on the trigger of his own gun.

"Wait! It's not a weapon."

He pulled out a badge.

"Langley?" This must have been Louis's CIA contact. David breathed a sigh of relief.

The man—Archer, according to the name on his badge—nodded. "We've been investigating the current administration's ties with Cinq Flèches and Goldsmith."

"You're CIA . . . ? You mean you lied to me?" Van's shocked indignation fell flat.

"I won't deny it. But, after all I went through working under you, I don't feel any need to apologize."

"But me . . . What will happen to me?"

Archer smiled.

"You're the lucky winner of an all-expenses-paid vacation in a federal court."

He turned back to David. "We've been after this one for a while. If Red Shield doesn't mind, of course."

". . . Whatever works for you."

David lowered his gun.

Combined with Van's testimony—they could count on him selling out for a lighter sentence—the evidence Archer would have been able to gather from inside Cinq Flèches America would be enough to bring down the corporation. And in the next few days, Secretary of Defense Grant was going to have a lot of explaining to do.

"But there's something else."

As he pulled Van down the stairwell, Archer turned and looked back up at David.

"Grant has authorized the air force to implement Option D. In ten minutes, this place will be nothing but a smoking crater."

There was a quiet ripping sound.

Saya lifted her head and turned her tear-clouded eyes toward the cocoons, still resting beside her on the stage.



The noise got louder. As Saya watched, the membranes of the cocoons stretched and tore. Like a baby bird hatching from its egg, a tiny hand reached up into the air.

The silence of the opera house was broken by the sound of two babies crying.

*The twin queens.*

Saya stood. Her lips trembled as she realized what she would have to do.

"Saya . . . if it is too much, I can do it." Hagi spoke softly from behind her.

"No. I have to do this." She had come this far. She had to finish it. Their blood would be on her hands, and hers alone.

Saya pressed her thumb against the edge of her blade. Fresh blood swelled through the grooves in her katana. She stepped toward the cocoons.

Within the cracked-open shells were two infants.

Their faces were scrunched from their crying, but suddenly the two of them fell silent and stared up at Saya, their eyes wide and curious.

*Do they think I'm their mother?*

Both of their faces smiled, as bright as rays of sunshine. Their hands and feet reached out to the woman standing over them.

The sword trembled in Saya's hands.

All she had to do was push the blade down, and it would be over. They would never have to repeat the painful struggle that had dominated Saya's and Diva's lives. They could rest in peace.

*Why? Why won't my blade move?*

Footsteps pounded up the aisle.

"Saya!"

*Kai.*

He stood panting at the edge of the stage. "What . . . What are you doing . . . ?"

She didn't want Kai to see this. Not what she was about to do, nor what would happen after, when Hagi kept his promise.

"I'm sorry, Kai." Her voice was scarcely a whisper.

"What . . . ? Why are you apologizing?"

"I . . . am going to die."

Kai stared in silent shock.

"I made Hagi promise . . . after everything is over . . . this has to end with me." She looked up at Kai, tears streaming down her face. "Now, I am going to kill these children. And after that . . . it will be my turn."

It had been decided long ago. She had to stop the cycle, to make sure that none of this would ever happen again.

But now she could feel Kai's voice beginning to eat away at her resolve.

Saya raised her head as if to shake away any uncertainty.

"I have to die."

The increased intensity of the rain drowned out the babies' voices.

Kai was momentarily speechless, then his eyebrows formed a sharp angle.

"What do you mean, you have to die? It's all over, isn't it? There's no reason for you to die, too!"

"Even if this battle ends, it's only a matter of time until someone else decides to use Chiropterans as weapons. I don't want to see another war over our blood."

On the floor, rainwater mixed with puddles of blood, human and Chiropteran. How many more had died, all over the world?

And all of the death had grown from the blood of the Chiropteran queens.

"I don't want to see anyone get hurt anymore."

Saya tightened her grip with both hands and returned her gaze to the two cocoons.

Unaware of any danger, the two bright-faced babies cooed like newborn chicks.

". . . Forgive me."

"Saya, stop it!" Kai's voice was equal parts anguish and resolve. Her hands froze.

"You can't be serious! Who decided this?" She heard his voice shake and looked up. He was standing at the edge of the stage, his hands clenched in fists, his body trembling with anger.

"If there's anyone out there saying you shouldn't exist, I'll find him and kick his ass!"

The hardened warrior was gone. This Kai was the hotheaded youth she had known in Okinawa, rushing headlong at anything that dared to threaten his precious little sister.

Kai breathed violently and looked down at the smiling babies lying below the tip of Saya's sword.

"And these two . . . I'll take care of them, just like you. I'll make sure they are always happy and loved."

To Kai it didn't matter what people were. He saw past surfaces, found what made them special. To Saya, prepared to abandon herself to her fate, Kai's hope shone like the sun. She lowered her sword and sank to her knees.

"And you, too, Saya. I'll always look after you. And one way or another, you'll always have a place where you belong."

Kai's eyes glistened with tears as he turned from Saya to Hagi.

"You think so, too, don't you, Hagi?"

"I . . ." His voice was soft and sad. "I serve Saya. I will do as she wishes."

Kai's right fist slammed into Hagi's jaw.

"Kai!" Saya sprung to her feet.

Ignoring Saya's plea, Kai grabbed Hagi by the collar.

"Who are *you*? What do *you* want? Speak for yourself, for once! *What do you want?*"

" . . . "

Hagi stood in anguished silence.

Kai's voice softened. "You love her, don't you? Then tell her . . ."

Hagi looked cautiously at Saya. She looked so small and fragile on the stage, as if a careless touch of his hand would be enough to break her.

"I wanted to see you smile."

His voice grew louder and more confident as he spoke.

"The way you smiled on the day we first met . . . I have dedicated my life to serving you, but I would give all of that up just to see your smile again."

If Saya's smile was the reward, one hundred years was no more than a moment, and all the pain and sorrow would wash away.

When Anshel had first brought the young Hagi to the Zoo, he had been terrified and distraught. Sold and abandoned by his family, he had been passed along between strangers whose ways confused and frightened him. Finally, he was given to Saya.

He didn't care about fate or destiny. He was frightened and alone, and the harder he tried to stop crying, the harder he cried. And she had taken him in her arms and spoken the first kind words he had heard since coming to the Zoo.

*—It's all right.*

"When I awoke as a Chevalier, the first things you showed me were your tears."

He remembered her eyes when she had crouched over the cold remains of Joel as the mansion burned behind them.

He couldn't stand it. He had wanted to comfort her as she had comforted him, but he was a monster, and all he could do was stand helpless as she cried.

"And it was rage that drove you to take up arms and fight."

Sometime during those long years, Saya had forgotten how to smile.

"But when I found you in Okinawa, you were wrapped in joy."

He thought of Saya's smiling face: playing catch with George, talking with her friends, riding on the back of Kai's bike.

"To see that you had found that smile again—even if I could not be the one to give it to you . . ."

Hagi turned to Kai.

"You were the one who made it so, Kai. You and your family."

Saya listened to his words with tears in her eyes.

Hagi would do anything for her.

For years, he had shielded her body with his own.

When nightmares had kept her awake, he had played lullabies on his cello and wiped the tears from her cheeks with gentle hands.

Now, he turned and knelt at her feet.

"Saya, I am your Chevalier. I have lived according to your wishes. But now . . . I must go against your wishes, just this once."

His hand covered hers on the grip of her katana, and, gently, he loosed it from her fingers and set it aside.

"Saya . . . Live."

Hagi looked deep into Saya's black eyes as he spoke.

"Please, live."

"Hagi . . ."

For the first time she could remember, a shy smile began to spread across his face.

"Live on today, for the sake of tomorrow. You don't have to fight anymore."

Saya didn't know if she had leaned closer to Hagi, or he to her, only that the space between them was gone.

His fingers brushed across her moist cheek, and their lips met.

She had felt his lips before, after she had first awakened, when he had passed his blood from his mouth to hers. This was something new, different—and, at the same time, the most natural thing in the world.

*Like lovers do—*

It lasted only a moment, but to the two of them, after waiting more than a hundred years, it was as precious as any eternity.



Saya opened her eyes.

Even after they had separated, she could feel the sensation of the kiss as she gazed up into Hagi's face.

His eyes spoke to her.

*Choose for tomorrow.*

She put her fingers to his cheek and touched the warm tears that lingered there. The words found their way to her lips.

"—I want to live."

She clung to him, smiling through her tears.

"I want to be with you, and Kai, and everybody . . . All of us, together!"

This wish came from the very bottom of her heart.

Casting aside any sense of duty and feelings of guilt and anxiety, she cried out her desire.

*I want to live in this world.*

Like the sun breaking through the clouds, the sound of laughter filled the air.

It was Diva's daughters.

"They're saying that they want to live, too."

Kai chuckled.

"Nankurunaisa."

The magic spell spun easily off the tongue of its greatest believer, Kai.

"Live today and laugh tomorrow. Look to the future, and try your hardest, and things will work themselves out."

Now, finally, they could take one day at a time and live as they pleased. Kai believed in hope.



And he had taught Saya to believe as well.

David's shout broke through their reverie.

"Hurry and get out of here! They invoked Option D!"

"Option D . . . ?"

Saya recognized the name. Option D was what had destroyed the nature conservatory in Okinawa and reduced George's body to ashes.

"Louis is waiting with a car at the rear entrance! Run!"

David, pushing Joel's wheelchair, disappeared into the corridor, with Okamura close behind.

Saya looked down again and exchanged a glance with Kai and Hagi.

There was no time.

She handed her katana to Hagi and lifted up one of the babies. Kai picked up the other one and ran across the stage.

The exits backstage were blocked with broken set pieces and rubble. The only way out was the main entrance to the hall.

They were halfway down the sloping staircase when the ceiling caved in. Great chunks of marble and oak beams broke off like rock salt and smashed down into the rows of seats.

Red eyes glared at them through the smoke and dust.

". . . ?!"

Just as she sensed the Chiropteran, a ball of lightning flew forward at them from its open maw.

"Saya!"

Hagi pulled her behind him, shielding her and the baby with his body as the blast sheared through the air.

"Hagi . . . !"

Where his left arm had been, his sleeve hung in tatters, and blood pooled on the floor below. But he stood fast, glaring up at the black figure of the monster facing him.

*Anshel Goldsmith.* It was because Hagi had defeated him. His twisted body was blackened and charred, and through the gaping hole in his torso Saya could see the seats behind him. The area around the giant wound was completely carbonized and cracked apart in chunks as he roared.

"Diva may be dead, but . . . her children are still alive . . . !"

Was it his thirst for revenge that had dragged Anshel's nearly lifeless body here? Or was it something else? Without Diva to protect them, surely he saw the next generation of queens as the means to restart his beloved Delta Project . . .

"I won't let that happen! These children still have a future waiting for them!"

"As if you . . . could stop me . . ."

Anshel threw back his head, readying another blast, but before he could fire, Hagi shot up and grabbed Anshel's throat in his right hand. Broken fangs pierced the air. Anshel's head snapped back, and the blast intended for Kai and Saya smashed another hole in the ceiling.

Slabs of marble fell, and the floor began to shake.

"That sound . . . The bombs?"

Kai looked up as he pressed the baby he carried against his chest to protect her from falling rubble.

Through the crashing masonry, Saya could hear the rumble of jet engines.

Hagi's eyes met Kai's for a moment before the Chevalier turned his attention back to Anshel. His eyes burned with determination.

Hagi kicked off the ground and gripped the scabbard in his mouth. With his right hand, he drew the katana, its blade still damp with Saya's blood.

Anshel didn't have time to dodge. The tip of the sword entered through his neck and went in deep.

The large monster howled with rage, and his claws plunged into Hagi's chest, pinning them both to the back wall as Anshel's flesh turned to stone.

"Hagi!" Saya rushed toward him, but Kai grabbed her arm.

"Saya, it's too dangerous!"

"Kai." Hagi spoke the word through bloody lips.

". . . Yes?"

"Take care of Saya."

"Hagi! No! Hagi . . . Hagi!"

Saya cried out over and over with all her strength, straining against Kai's arms.

For a moment, his eyes met hers through the falling rubble.

"Nankurunaisa."

Even over the thunderous roar, his voice was quiet and clear.

"I love you."

Hagi smiled.

The ceiling fell, and his face disappeared in a shower of stone.

"Hagi!" She twisted against Kai's grip, not caring if she lived or died.

As her sobs died down, a sudden quiet fell over the opera house.  
The collapse was over.

"... Saya, let's go home. Back to Okinawa."

Kai's grip on her tightened as he whispered in her ear.

Clutching the baby in her arms, she followed Kai toward the door, her heart full of Hagi's love as she took her first halting steps toward tomorrow.



EPILOGUE: OKINAWA

AUTUMN CAME MORE gradually to Okinawa than to the rest of the country. The evenings were warm, the sky still showed signs of summer, and the track-team members practicing outside wore their short-sleeved summer uniforms.

With a high-pitched clang, the high-jump bar fell down. Saya smiled as she watched the girl who had missed her jump roll on the mat and kick her feet in frustration.

Two years ago, Saya had had trouble with the high jump at about that height, too. She had almost made it in the semifinals that would have allowed her to compete at the all-prefecture meet, and she had stayed late day after day, struggling to beat her personal best.

It had been a channel for other, larger frustrations at that time: the difficulty of trying to move forward in her life without knowing who she truly was.

Everything had changed when she had met Hagi.

The memories she had regained weren't beautiful, but they had carried her through the journey with David and the others.

And what a difficult journey it had been.

She thought of the quiet moments between the battles, of Min and Anna-Marie in Vietnam, and Grey and his family in Europe.

She thought of Clara and Elizaveta, and all the others who had lost their lives in battle.

Aurélien, Moses, Carmen . . . They had started as enemies, but in the end, the Schiff had become close allies—and friends.

And Solomon. The dance they had shared at the formal ball still seemed like a dream. A queen, dancing with her rival's Chevalier . . . Had it been the call of their blood that had brought them together?

Saya didn't think so.

Solomon had crossed an impassable barrier to fight for Saya as her Chevalier. Saya would never forget how he had given his life for her.

And then there was Diva.

Diva, who had once been afraid to leave the safety of her cell in the tower for the world outside.

If only Saya had remained by her side. Perhaps she could have steered her sister toward a different path.

If only they had died together, early on . . .

But Saya was still alive.

She would enjoy the time she still had with the people she loved.

She would no longer hold back. She decided this on her own.

She would live today for the sake of tomorrow, without fear.

"Saaaya!" With a cheerful chirp, Kaori plowed into Saya's back and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. "Why didn't you wait up? I told you I was in charge of the classroom cleaning today!"

Kaori was a senior now, but Saya was relieved to see she hadn't changed a bit.

A month earlier, when she had finally returned to Okinawa, Kaori had greeted her with the same big smile. It had been years since the two girls had seen each other, but right then, it felt like they hadn't even been apart for a day.

*I know you'll be OK, no matter what happens.*

That's what Kaori said to her when Saya had left Okinawa. Kaori hadn't known anything about the battle against the Chiropterans or her friend's true nature, but she had believed in Saya and pushed her on. It was Kaori who had given her the courage to step forward and join the fight.

"Sorry. I just wanted to watch . . ."

With Kaori still hanging from her back, Saya turned her eyes toward the athletic field.

"Hmm. Why don't you rejoin the team if you miss it so much?"

Saya giggled at Kaori's prodding.

"I'm still recovering . . ."

That wasn't the real reason. It was true she wasn't in tiptop shape, and that she had needed to rest more since coming back, but even in her current condition, if she participated in the track team she would be breaking world records. A Chiropteran queen on the field wouldn't be fair to the other competitors.

"You didn't even fall asleep in class this morning."

"Yeah. I am feeling a little better today."

In the month since they came back to Okinawa, Saya had caught herself drifting off during the day. Now that she was no longer fighting, her hibernation was slipping up more quickly. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold the sleep at bay.



But for as long as she could, she would keep doing what she had done every day for the last month: dressing in the uniform of Koza Commercial High School every day and joining Kaori and the other students in class. That alone felt almost magical.

And today, she was alert, her mind as clear as the bright sky. It seemed to Saya like a good omen.

"Oh, yeah. Tonight, right?" Kaori hopped down from Saya's back as she asked her question, and Saya nodded in the affirmative.

"Yeah, seven o'clock."

Tonight, they would celebrate the reopening of Omoro and the completion of the renovations. They didn't have their restaurant permit yet, so only close friends were invited, but it was still Kai's first night as a real restaurateur. Right at that moment he was probably having a meltdown in the kitchen.

"I have to get to work. See you then!" Kaori waved, and Saya watched her walk to her bicycle, then ride off down the street.

In the sky above, American air force jets roared past, leaving thin clouds of smoke in their trails.

It was as if she had never left. Only Saya's long hair testified to the time that had passed, ruffling in the wind as Saya turned her face to the sky.

She couldn't remember the last time Julia's office had been this busy.

When it had served as the cover for an Asian Red Shield station, Saya had been Julia's only patient, but now she ran a thriving clinic.

When she was with Collins, she could never have imagined that working on normal people could be so difficult and, at the same time, so rewarding. Certainly the change wasn't only in the circumstances, but also within her.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine, I guess . . ."

As Julia pulled aside the privacy curtain, Saya answered from the bed.

Neither of them knew how long the mixture of human blood and medicine in the IV would delay her hibernation. Julia lifted Saya's wrist to check her pulse.

"You look better today."

"Yeah—I usually get really sleepy during the day, but today was different."

Saya smiled up at Julia. Their easy conversation reminded her of the first days when she had come to the clinic, before she had known its true purpose.

"How about you, Julia-san?"

"Me?"

Julia smiled in spite of herself as her hand rose to rest on her belly.

"I'm fine. Everything is going right on schedule."

She was only a few months along, but so far, so good. The sensation of another life growing inside her was like a personal experiment for the researcher in Julia.

And naturally, her other research continued.

She had been successful in isolating the chemicals which suppressed Base D in Saya's blood. This meant it wouldn't be

impossible to suppress the latent Cinq Flèches Chiropteran trigger in the general population. At the same time, it had given her the means to counteract the Thorn in the last remaining Schiff.

"Between her and the twins, this one will have a ready-made circle of friends to play with."

Julia looked over at the next bed, where Lulu was peering intently into the bassinet, playing peek-a-boo with Diva's daughters, their giggles filling the room.

Julia wondered if they connected because they all had Chiropteran blood. No, that was just conjecture. Species was nothing but a classification. Saya and Kai had shown her that the connections that truly mattered came from something else entirely.

For now, Lulu was confined to the clinic, but soon she would be completely cleared of the Thorn. Eventually she should be able to walk in the sunlight as her siblings had always dreamed of doing.

Shortly after Julia had sent Saya on her way, David's car pulled up. The four of them—David, Julia, Louis, and Joel—gathered around a table in the back room of the clinic.

"How's the baby?"

It was always the first thing Joel asked about.

"Perfect, thanks to you."

"Really? I am glad to hear it. But take special care. You too, David."

David's response was pure David. "I am ready for duty whenever you need me."

Joel laughed. "Don't worry about it. Put your feet up. We can manage without you for a little while."

Louis placed a hand on David's shoulder. He took a bite of the corn dog he held in his other hand and laughed. "And happiness comes from new things. Right?"

David's face finally cracked into a grin. He turned to Julia. "So, how's Saya?"

Her eyes were serious. The news wasn't good.

Saya was sinking deeper toward her dormant stage. Her heart rate and body temperature had taken sudden dips, meaning her body was preparing for its long sleep. Julia guessed that she had perhaps twelve hours before she was completely immobile.

Her burst of energy today was her body's way of burning off any surplus before she went into the big sleep. It was a physiological phenomenon seen in animals about to enter a state of hibernation.

After listening to Julia's explanation, David was quiet for a short while. He exchanged glances with Joel before looking back at Julia and nodding his head slightly.

"I see. I will explain it to Kai."

"That's for the best."

Saya didn't need to hear the news herself, but Kai, her only relative, would have to be told.

As Saya got off the bus at the stop on Park Avenue, she couldn't help but glance at the plaza across the street, just as she had every day since returning to Okinawa.

In the fading daylight she thought she heard the sound of a cello. But her eyes searched in vain for the tall young man drawing the bow over the strings.

Hagi was gone.

The familiar town suddenly felt cold and foreign. The tall form that should have been at her side, as constant as her shadow, was gone.

The strains of the cello echoed in her head the whole way home.

For some reason, the road she always took home looked very different today. The moisture in the breeze, the individual voices of children chattering as they walked home from school, and the look of the dogs on walks with their masters all stood out crystal clear.

Saya pushed open the door to the shop and the familiar sound of the cowbell rang out.

"I'm home."

"Saya. Are you hungry?"

Kai looked back at her from the other side of the counter.

This, at least, felt very familiar.

Saya pulled out a stool at the counter and sat down facing Kai.

They had left the interior as unchanged as possible—buying new tables and chairs to replace the ones that had been broken, spackling over the bullet holes in the walls, and patching the rusted pipes. The restaurant George had opened would now be Kai's place.

Saya's eyes moved to one picture hanging on the wall.

From the frame, a family of four smiled back at her.

George and Riku would never see the new Omoro.

Saya's gaze fell to the floor.

"... Hey. Let me give you a haircut."

Kai's offer came from out of nowhere.

"Hn—?"

"It'll make your head lighter."

Was her hair that much longer? She looked up and pushed her bangs back from her face.

Since she had left Okinawa, the thought of getting her hair cut had hardly crossed her mind.

But now she was home.

Just like Kai had said, maybe it was time to lighten the load.

The two of them spread newspapers outside the door, and Saya sat down on the chair Kai had dragged out to the stoop.

At first she was a little nervous, but as the scissors snipped away her locks, she felt trust in Kai's abilities. She relaxed and enjoyed the sweep of the comb through her hair and the rhythmic snips of the scissors.

As the sun fell in the sky, the cyclone fence painted a lattice pattern on the park across the street.

Finally, Kai spoke. His voice was deep but quiet.

"A lot has happened since we came home."

The scissors didn't miss a beat.

"Yeah." Saya was careful to hold her head straight as she replied.

The setting sun and the sound of the scissors lulled her almost to sleep. She felt like today she had more energy than usual, but . . .

"Did you hear about the cameraman . . . ?"

"Okamura-san?"

"Yeah. He got hired back to the newspaper, and they're already talking about sending him to cover a story overseas."

With a generous donation, Joel had been able to procure a complete transcript from Lycée du Cinq Flèches, but Saya was still busy with tests and tutoring to make up for the school she had missed. Kai, on the other hand, had already graduated from high school, and the technical school he would attend didn't start until April, so he had some time on his hands. David, Louis, Okamura, and he had become a tight-knit group, and they saw each other often.

"Where is he going?"

"I think he said the Middle East. He said Mao's coming with him."

"That sounds like Jahana-san."

"M-hm."

Saya's shoulders shook as she laughed and Kai had to pull the scissors away to join her.

It seemed Mao had found her calling as a newspaper reporter. And now she had more experience than any fresh journalism-school graduate.

A journalist's mission wasn't only bringing the truth to light. Every truth was multifaceted, and it took true skill and passion to show all those perspectives simply and directly. Setting aside one's own personal beliefs and prejudices and presenting the issue as is in the media was extremely difficult, and with that power came an even greater responsibility.

Saya believed in Mao. She never gave up and saw every idea she started to its conclusion. No matter what obstacles got in her way, Mao was a fighter to the end.

"I wonder if Joel will come tonight."

"I heard a little while ago he had arrived at the airport."

"Do you think he'll like the food?"

Kai shrugged. "Don't worry. It won't kill him or anything."

"You're right."

Joel was certainly accustomed to using chopsticks. But the idea of such a refined man chewing a mouthful of champloo seemed funny to Saya.

The harder Saya tried not to grin, the wider her smile got.

A big group of friends was gathering tonight. Kaori and Mao, Kai's buddies Kato and Kakimoto, Joel, David, Julia, Louis, Okamura, and Lulu and the two babies. Only Hagi remained a palpable absence in their midst.

"Close your eyes and hold your head straight so I can cut your bangs."

Kai combed her bangs across her face.

"He kept them trimmed while you were traveling, right?"

Kai must have been thinking about Hagi, too.

"You know, I didn't like him at first."

Saya remembered their fight at the beach.

"But he was like me—all he wanted was to keep you safe."

"... Yeah."

Hagi had always been there to protect her. Even when they were separated or when she didn't notice, he was watching out for her.

"You never know—maybe he'll show up again one of these days."

The scissors snipped across her bangs.

"If you call, he'll come."



Kai's voice sounded so certain.

"I'll never forget the ones who fought by our side. Especially him." He smiled. "The people you remember . . . They become a part of who you are."

"..."

Saya nodded quietly.

All of those memories made up the fiber of her being.

Hagi and Riku still lived on in her heart. She could see their faces so clearly when she closed her eyes.

"Don't look down, or I won't be able to get your bangs even."

"Oh? Yeah." Saya lifted her face.

The rhythm of the scissors and the late afternoon breeze made Saya's eyelids feel heavy once again.

The clipping turned into the sound of the ocean.

Silky waves passed her ankles as the sea called to her.

As if the waves carried her, she took one step, and then another, deeper and deeper into the warm water.

*Saya.*

She turned to see who was calling her. There was a dark figure standing on the beach.

*Hagi.*

Just as she thought, he was never too far away.

Saya pulled her legs around to walk back to the shore.

"Saya?"

The strong voice came from close to her ear and Saya opened her eyes with a start.

Kai was standing right in front of her.

"All done!"

"Huh . . . ?"

She looked in the mirror Kai held up, and took a deep breath. It was like she had gone back in time.

"Just like the good old days."

"Yeah."

Kai ruffled her hair with his fingers. Short hair clippings floated down, tickling her neck and collarbone like the strokes of a paintbrush.

It was a lively evening.

Laughter and conversation filled the air of the restaurant.

Kai clearly had skills in the kitchen. He still didn't have a chef's license, so he couldn't sell his dishes yet, but it was no problem for them to host a closed party of close friends.

For Louis the flavor was secondary to the proper volume.

Kai flinched as he saw Louis set down another empty plate.

"Slow down a little, will you?"

"Is that something you would say to a customer? I am contributing to your improvement, aren't I?"

"This is kinda bitter, Kai."

Lulu stepped from around Louis's drum-like belly, holding a clear mug.

Kai got one look at her beet-red face and almost dropped his cleaver.

"Beer isn't for kids, Lulu!"

"It's all right. In Asia a cup of sake is worth a hundred doses of medicine, right?"

As usual, Louis was broad with his generalizations, but to Kai's surprise, Julia nodded in assent.

"Malt-alcohol drinks have vitamin B and are rich in minerals. It won't affect her medication, so a little shouldn't hurt."

Julia herself wasn't drinking at all. She was pregnant now, and she was very careful of what she put in her body.

Her chopsticks went mostly for the tofu champloo and mimiga made from pig's ears, both high in protein and low in fat.

"This is a very nice awamori."

Joel smiled as he brought the Satsuma-cut glass of island sake to his lips.

Kai smiled back. Of course Joel's refined tastes extended to local specialties. This particular sake was from one of George's most cherished bottles, and Kai would never have wasted it on someone without the palate to appreciate it.

"How about you, David?"

"I don't drink."

David grimaced and took a sip of his oolong tea.

"Come on. This is a celebration, and you need proper congratulations."

Okamura had tried to fill David's glass with beer countless times already, and every time, David's scowl had sunk a little deeper.

"That has nothing to do with anything. You aren't going to change my mind."

"You haven't changed a bit, have you?"

Okamura threw up his hands in defeat.

Thankfully for David, Okamura's devoted assistant was more focused on her junior, Kaori.

"So, you got a boyfriend now?"

"No, why would you—"

"A guy you like?"

"No . . ."

"All right, then. I got the perfect boy for you. I'll even set it up. You have nothing to worry about. He's not one of those."

She pointed casually over the counter at Kakimoto and Kato.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Kato lodged his complaint over Mao's shoulder, but she ignored him.

Kakimoto seemed oblivious to the conversation and lifted his elbows off the table to call after Kai.

"You really turned into quite the big shot. You used to be only into bikes and baseball, and now you're taking over your old man's place."

"Wait a sec. Don't tell me that's a real fish?" Kato had turned back to the counter and was peering at Kai's cutting board.

"Haven't you ever seen Aobudai before?" Kai couldn't believe there was a native-born Okinawan who couldn't recognize blue humphead parrotfish.

"I've eaten it as sashimi, but I guess I didn't notice the color."

Kai rolled his eyes and looked around the restaurant.

Someone was missing.

"Take care of this for me, will you?" He put down the plate holding the fresh-cut sashimi on the counter and washed his hands.

It was already after midnight, and the lights were out in almost all the houses in the neighborhood. The only light came from the street lamps, which were now attracting all the flying insects.

From the front door, Kai could see across the street. Her back was turned, and her fingers were interlocked in the mesh fence.

As Kai was about to call out to her, she suddenly slumped against the fence.

Kai rushed to help support her.

Once again, he was amazed at how light she was—this girl whose frail body had carried such a tremendous burden for so long.

"Are you OK?"

"Kai, I can't . . . anymore . . ."

Her voice melted in the darkness.

She didn't need to say another word. Kai understood.

It had finally come. The long sleep could no longer wait.

"I'll grab Julia-sensei."

Kai turned to run back into the house, but Saya grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Take me back . . . to the place I started from . . ."

Her voice faded in and out. But her eyes were bright with determination.

Without a word Kai scooped Saya onto his back.

Joel had spared no expense in arranging a secret location for Saya's sleep. It was obvious that during her thirty-year hibernation, the best thing was for her to be safely under Red Shield's watch.

But Saya was not a weapon to be stored on a shelf.

She was a daughter of the Miyagusuku family.

She would go home to rest somewhere else.

The motorcycle roared onto the highway toward the beach.

The ocean and sky were tinted a very faint purple, the first hint of the new day.

Saya was seated behind Kai, her arms wrapped tight around his waist. The night air was cool, and the salty wind was strong. But Kai could distinctly feel the warmth of her body pressed against his.

How many times had they taken this road together?

Saya was such a good person—honest, without a mean bone in her body. She was the kind of person who smiled even to strangers. Kai tried not to think of losing her past, her future, that kindness, and the smile on her face.

Kai wanted to hold on to that smile forever.

It was the same thing Hagi had wanted, and Solomon, too, he thought.

They loved Saya. So did Kai, even if he wasn't always able to say the right things to comfort her. That's why he had chosen to take this route—in hopes of putting one last smile on Saya's face.

Saya loved this beach.

She loved the way the sun looked as it set across the water and the way the waves crashed against the giant cragged rocks.

Both Kai and Saya loved looking out over the neverending sea.

"... I will never forget."

Kai heard her whisper and felt the warmth against his back grow noticeably stronger.

He couldn't respond. But he felt the same way.

They arrived at their destination. Saya didn't have the strength to lift herself off the seat.

Kai turned his back to her and pulled her arms around his shoulders.

He held her hands carefully to his chest as he lifted her on his back and off the bike.

Kai walked carefully, one step at a time, up the tall stairs.

"Kai . . . Thank you . . ."

The quiet voice sounded like a sigh in his ear.

Kai paused a moment and smiled.

"You don't have to thank me."

As he slowly continued up the stairs, Kai spoke again.

"Saya?"

She didn't respond.

Kai stopped and asked again, louder.

"Saya—?"

In the stillness of the morning air Kai could hear her shallow breathing.

Kai knew he would not hear Saya's voice again.

He had already been left behind.

A blanket of loneliness swept over him, and he stood on the stairs without moving.

After a moment, he started up the steps again. As he walked, he spoke to Saya.

". . . Saya. You taught me something, too. About living for tomorrow."

He knew she couldn't hear him, but Kai needed to put his feelings into words.

"You came here to fight . . . not for your happiness, but for everyone's . . ."





Saya was loved by many people. And she loved many people. More than she loved herself. That was where she had found the strength to keep fighting for so long, until the very end.

"... I promise ..."

Kai's voice began to tremble. His vision became blurry and he ignored the tears rolling down his cheeks as he continued.

"I will look after them. They will be happy ..."

Kai had made many promises before.

Some of them he hadn't been able to keep ... even when he had fought with all of his strength.

This promise, he would keep no matter what.

"Sleep well, Saya."

The autumn sun hung hot over Okinawa.

Just before daybreak, Kai led the two little girls up the steps where he had once carried Saya.

"Kai! Piggyback."

"Hey! Careful!"

Hibiki jumped onto his back, and Kai used his left hand to support her tiny hips.

Her thin arms wrapped around Kai's and she rested her chin on his shoulder.

"You are a preschooler now, so you can do it yourself. Look, Kanade's walking all the way up on her own."

Hibiki's twin held tight to his left hand as she solemnly climbed the stairs one by one. At the mention of her name, she stopped and looked up at Kai.

"..."

Her eyes looked just like Saya's as she gazed upon her adoptive father and her younger sister riding on his back.

He knew he was sunk when her lips parted in a grin.

"Kai, carry me, too!"

"You guys are driving me nuts..."

Four-year-old Kanade and Hibiki didn't weigh much, but carrying both of them up the steep steps would be quite a task, even for Kai.

Children grew so quickly.

Four years had passed since he had placed Saya in the Miyagusuku family tomb to sleep. Now, he was bringing Diva's children to visit their sleeping aunt.

Legally, Kai was their father, but he had made sure that their birth certificates listed their family name as Otonashi—just like Saya.

David had pulled some strings to get them recognized and registered, and now they lived in the second floor above Omoro with Kai.

He had no idea raising children was so much work...

During these four years Kai came to understand the hardships George must have gone through: crying in the middle of the night, spitting up milk, diaper rash... During the day, when Kai was at his culinary college, Mao or Kaori or sometimes Lulu watched the girls, but Kai was still their father.

Everyone who had been touched by Saya wanted to help these two.

"Hey, Kai. Are we there yet?"

Soon after the twins began trekking up again on their own feet they started to get bored.

"You can call me *Dad*, you know."

"OK, Kai!"

"OK, Kai!"

The two answered at the same time, then smiled widely before breaking off together in a sprint before Kai had a chance to be angry at them.

Hibiki clutched an offering of flowers in her hand. Kanade carried the water bucket, but because she was so short the bottom banged on the ground with every step like a dented gong.

"Don't trip!"

Kai watched them race up the hill in the pure white sunlight. For now, they would keep growing like normal kids.

But when they turned fifteen or sixteen, things would change. They would become the queens of the Chiropterans, and their bodies would be locked into eternity. They would sleep for thirty years at a time, waking for vital two- or three-year periods.

He would have to explain it all to them when that time came.

Kai didn't know how he would go about telling them. But if he raised them right he should be able to look them both in the eyes and tell them the truth.

*How can I watch over them?*

The face of the young man Saya had loved flashed though Kai's mind.

Kai was only a human, not a Chevalier. But he had made a promise to Saya, and he could not break it. His mission was to keep Kanade and Hibiki happy. Saya too.

Kai made it to the top.

Kanade and Hibiki waited in front of the tortoiseshell-shaped tomb where Saya slept.

Kai's gaze swept the platform in front of the tomb.

There was something familiar about the breeze, like a chord from a familiar tune that hadn't been heard in a long time.

But there was no one else around.

There was nothing but the vibrant green and cobalt-blue ocean, and the clear sky above.

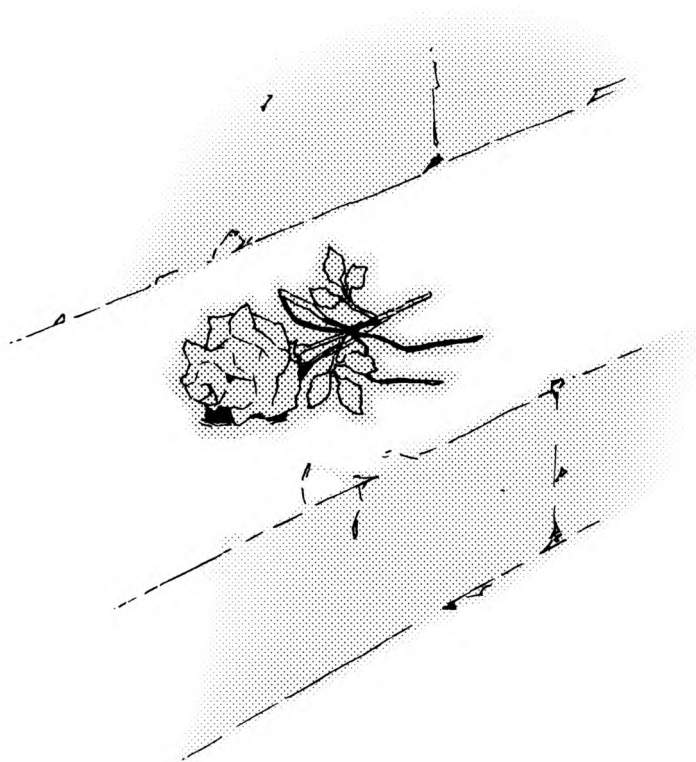
Kai looked down to see a single rose on the stone altar.

It was pink—Saya's favorite color. A dark ribbon was wrapped around its stem.

Kai smiled.

"He did come, after all . . ."

**END**



## AFTERWORD

It feels like I have been watching Saya and the others travel down their path for a long time.

From the time I received the materials—before the anime aired—until the broadcasts finished, two years had passed. Over that time I wrote the novelizations.

More time passes within the novels than it took me to write them.

Naturally, the time scales for Saya and Diva as Chiropterans are different from humans. However, when Saya awakens in Okinawa, she is just a regular girl, and although it's a clichéd description, she is a typical high-school student. She isn't extraordinarily beautiful or emotionally mature. She is a gentle soul who is suddenly pulled into an agonizing battle to begin her journey.

She possesses incredible powers, but on the inside she is still just that normal young girl. Saya is not the kind of heroine who goes through a catharsis.

She was born with blood beyond that of humans, but she has the same problems and worries as humans, even as she is fighting with all her might . . . This doesn't change from the point Saya leaves the Zoo, I believe. She doesn't surpass her enemies and her difficulties and she isn't the kind of heroine who has the strong determination and will to change the world and herself. She is influenced by her anxieties, and the pressure from her sense of duty and feelings of guilt is almost enough to crush her. Even though she doesn't always want the blood that runs through her, she becomes a life-sized heroine.

It's not a real expression, but Saya only says "nice things." I think this reveals her weaknesses and also the fact that she is truly a normal girl.

The level of wisdom and emotional strength of someone who can calmly face danger and make sacrifices for the benefit of the greater good is rare in the real world. This applies to Saya, as well.

It is human nature for Saya to find the courage to protect those close to her, but at the same time she is inviting pain onto herself. When it is all over, many people important to Saya are lost. Only when people focus so much on what they have lost do they increase the chance of making the same mistake again.

There is no question Saya is human.

The weak, timid, human Saya finds her strength, and I want to show my respect for Saya's fight to the finish by laying down my pen here.

We have come to the end of the story, but I want to take this opportunity to thank Tagami-san, whom I caused a lot of problems for; director Fujisaku-san, who always answered my questions with patience and kindness; Hashii-san, who made the amazing illustrations that fill the books; everyone at Production I.G./Aniplex; and, finally, all the readers who took the time to pick up these novels.

—*Ryo Ikehata*

## COMMENTARY

Having read the final manuscript of the novelized version of *Blood+*, there are many parts of the tale I want to talk about.

One is Kanade and Hibiki and the other people left behind.

Another is the Schiff, who died with honor.

Of course, I would love to write the whole story about Red Shield and the German Chevalier from World War II that wasn't even mentioned in the animated series—and I have received permission from I.G President Ishikawa—and I'll add some personal thoughts . . .

The anime version, the manga version, and finally, the novels.

From the beginning, *Blood+* was intended to be a three-pronged attack.

*Attack*—I use this term because the concept of *Blood* is of a katana-wielding girl named Saya, who has a very long history of fighting bloodsucking monsters called Chiropterans. "As the writer and man in charge, you can add whatever you like!" was the basic message I got (Actually I was told the rule is to not reveal the mysteries of Saya. That's why there is the "+").

I worked on the TV series, but the manga was done by Asuka Katsura-san, Kumiko Suekane-san, and Hirotaka Kisaragi-san.



The novelization was done by Ryo Ikehata-san, under the direction of Karino Minazuki-san.

As we tried to organize ourselves in creating these, it was often said, "If you find a point you want to focus on, please do." *How irresponsible*, you are probably thinking, but if the writers couldn't go off on tangents, then it would have been boring. On top of that, the idea of stopping others from expanding on the ideas I came up with seemed strange to me . . .

I requested the chance to check the other offerings to make sure they matched up with the TV series to a certain extent, but I think you can see each version of the series is its own story, in the voice of each writer.

In these novels, the Schiff play a vivid role.

From the moment the Schiff enter the story, Ikehata-san's writing brush—or should I say the fingers on his keyboard—start moving at a whole new rhythm, from what I could see.

Carmen and Aurélien were siblings . . .

. . . is how it can be read in the plot, and in a broader sense of the term this didn't conflict with the TV series, and was approved.

I actually didn't establish the characters of the Schiff as much as I would have liked, and for that, I secretly apologize. When I think about directing episode 45, "When the Sun Shines Through Our Fingers," and Moses and Carmen's farewell, I get a little teary . . . I couldn't say my eyes hurt from lack of sleep because the deadline to air was only a few days away.

Maybe it is a sort of atonement, but something inside me wants to write more about the youths who can only express themselves in battle. If the chance comes up, maybe I will.

In regards to theme, it isn't exactly original, but I wanted to say something we tend to forget through the Schiff's transitory existence.

If the Schiff came back, what would happen to the Chevalier? Since in the original story only one Schiff remains, if I were to write about what happens next, it would be one Schiff communicating with the others in the spiritual world, which is the stuff of gag manga.

Any Schiff stories would have to be of their past.

And, like the German story I mentioned earlier, it would be hard to write it so it didn't conflict with the original story.

So that's the idea of the idea.

When Kanade and Hibiki's time stops, a storyteller will appear.

It will be someone who knows the entire history.

From his mouth will come the truth about their past.

But I won't tell you what he tells them here. There wouldn't be enough space. And I am just beginning to work on the details.

In fact, I haven't even presented the idea to my publisher. Why don't I just make this the presentation? (You think I am joking, don't you?)

So this closes at least a part of the *Blood+* saga.

As for me, I have said all I can about Saya and Kai, in the TV animation and then in this novelization.

And if someone out there doesn't get it, I'll punch you in the head!

The idea that relationships can be repaired by a single grain of rice is one of George's theories, but it's something I have been reminding myself of, these days.

I am not really going to punch someone who doesn't listen to what I say. It was just a thought that ran through my head . . . maybe.

On to the conclusion.

About the person who left the rose—he will watch over her, don't you think?

Look ahead and believe in it, until Saya opens her eyes again.

If there were people who could show this much love, the world would be a happier place.

It's not an issue of actions, but of emotion. His actions are basically the same as a stalker's.

But I hope for his happiness. That's because I was a little rough on him.

—Junichi Fujisaku

Blood+ series director

March 2007, from the I.G studios